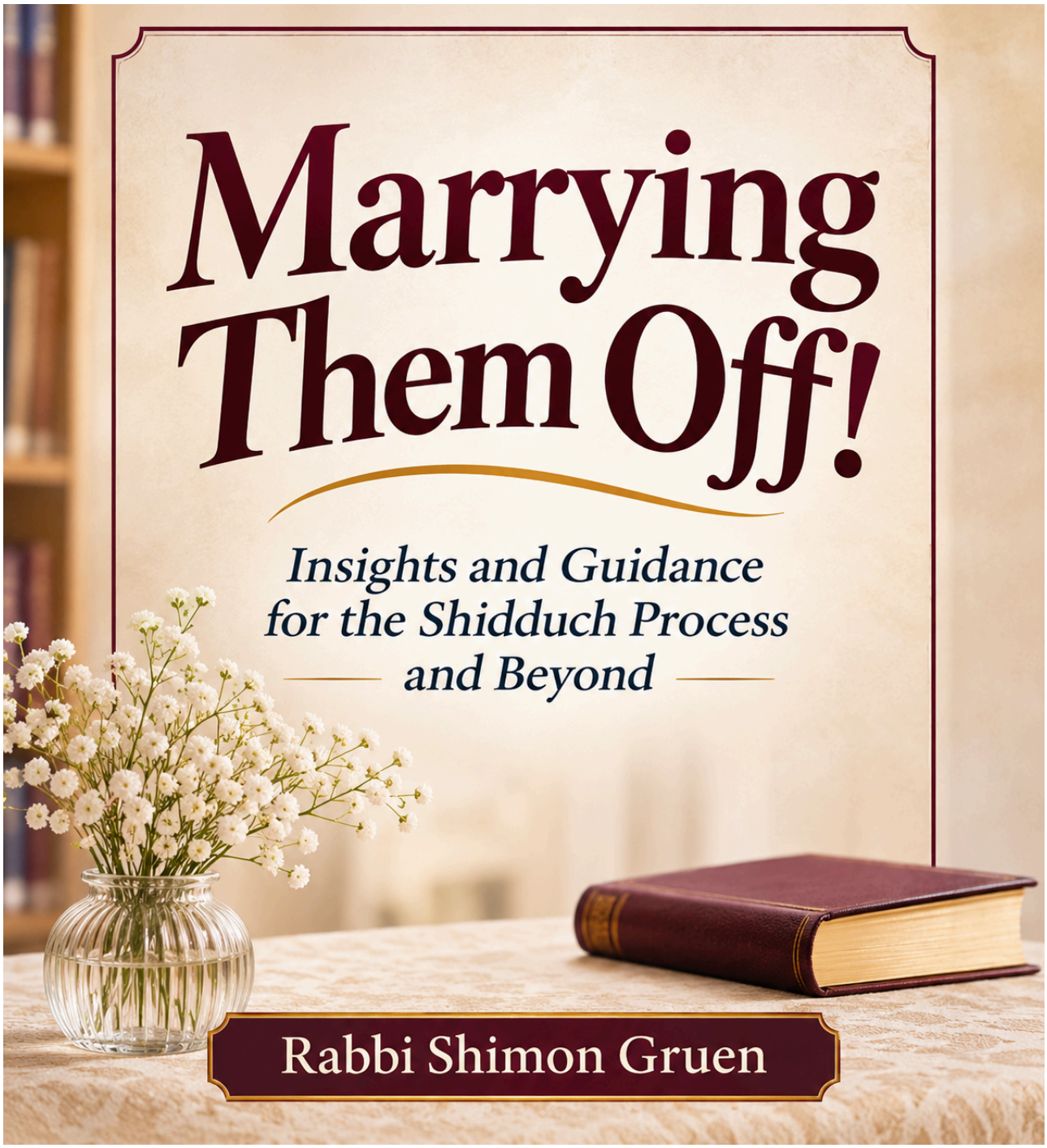

Marrying Them Off!
Insights and Guidance for the Shidduch Process and Beyond
Rabbi Shimon Gruen

MARRYING THEM OFF

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Introduction

When parents begin looking for *shidduchim* for their children, there is a lot to think about. What should we look for? What is important? Where can we compromise? How do we find out what we need to know? And what do we do when we and our children—or we and our spouse—see things differently?

In my work with people, I hear about these questions before a *shidduch*, and I hear about them years afterward. Sometimes there are difficulties that nobody could have foreseen. But sometimes you hear what happened and realize that something could have been understood better before the decision was made.

That doesn't mean we can arrange our children's whole future. We can't. Even after careful research and good guidance, we need tremendous help from *Hashem*. But we do have a responsibility to understand what we are doing.

These chapters come from those conversations and experiences. They are a practical discussion for parents trying to find a suitable *shidduch* for their child. They aren't a substitute for individual guidance, and they don't decide questions of *halachah*, *minhag*, or *mesorah*. Those need proper *Torah* guidance, with an understanding of the people and circumstances involved.

Part of what I hope to help with is getting the questions clear. Sometimes parents have many reasons, concerns, and explanations, but still don't understand what is really guiding them. The clearer you are about what you are asking and what matters to you, the more useful the guidance can be.

Not everyone faces the same difficulty. Some parents receive many suggestions; others are ready to look but hear very little. Sometimes the parents disagree about whether their child is ready to begin. These questions also need attention, alongside understanding what to look for and how to consider a suggestion.

There isn't one list that every family should use. But whatever your priorities are, remember for whom you are looking. You want to find someone with whom your child can build a good Jewish home. It is easy to become taken up with everything around the *shidduch* and give too little attention to the two people who will actually live together.

I hope these chapters will help parents think about what matters, ask the questions that need asking, and approach the decision with good judgment, responsibility, and prayer.

Chapter 1

What makes a good *shidduch*?

In the third chapter of *Mesillas Yesharim*, the *Ramchal* describes two things a person needs to examine. First, he needs to understand what is truly good and what is truly bad. Then he needs to look at his own actions and see how they measure up.

I once heard an explanation of why these are two separate steps. If a person begins by looking at himself, he can usually explain why what he is doing is right. He knows his reasons. He has his circumstances. By the time he finishes explaining, he may feel that there isn't much to change.

But first think about the question without making it about yourself. What does it mean to do the right thing? What does it mean to serve *Hashem* and live properly? Once you have thought about that, you can look at yourself and ask whether you are living up to what you understand.

I think it helps to approach *shidduchim* in that order too. Before discussing your son or daughter, what do we mean by a good *shidduch*? What makes someone a good catch? What is important, and what is less important? First let's understand that. Then we can look at our own children and consider what would be good for them.

The person himself

What is actually important in a *shidduch*? There is so much to consider. There is the boy and the girl, the families they come from, their education, their community, and the financial arrangements. What kind of home were they brought up in? Where did they learn? What are the parents like? Will there be support while the husband learns? Will the couple have help buying a home? These aren't imaginary concerns. Some of them can make a real difference in the couple's life.

And when a suggestion comes up, all these things arrive together. You hear the family's name, and you already have a picture. You know the father, you're impressed with the brothers, you like the school, and the financial arrangements sound good. Or something about the family bothers you, and before you know much about the boy or girl, you're already less interested.

But how much of your attention is going to the two people who will actually live together? You can know a great deal about everything around a *shidduch* and still know very little about the person your child would be marrying.

This is where I would put ninety percent of the weight: on the boy and girl themselves. Everything surrounding them belongs in the other ten percent. That may sound surprising when some of those other considerations feel so important. I'm not saying that they mean nothing. I'm saying that they shouldn't receive anything close to the same weight as the two people whose marriage this will be.

Obviously, there needs to be a suitable match to begin with. If a girl wants a husband who will devote himself to serious learning for many years, and the boy is already pursuing a career, that isn't one of the small details I'm putting into the other ten percent. They are looking for different lives. The same applies to a drastic difference in age or a major difference in religious background. I'm not suggesting that you overlook those things and consider two people who aren't looking for the same kind of home.

But don't make the ballpark so narrow that every difference puts someone outside it. A small age gap or a difference in community or family culture doesn't necessarily mean two entirely different ways of life. First establish that the suggestion is within a suitable range. Then, within that range, understand where the great majority of your attention belongs: on the boy and girl themselves.

When two people can hear each other, be flexible, and work things out, many differences become much easier to live with. When they can't, even a small difference can become a major difficulty. That is why I put so much weight on the people who will have to manage those details together.

If you have two suitable possibilities, both have that first ninety percent, and one also has more of the surroundings you would prefer, by all means. Why not? But don't lose sight of which part will matter most in their daily lives.

That is where the research needs to begin. A father once spoke to me about a *shidduch*. He had investigated all sorts of details, and things were being held up over one thing and then another. I asked him, “What about the person himself? Did you find out whether that is good?”

He said, “I'll tell you the truth. I decided a long time ago that you can't really find that out. You ask friends, you ask people, and every boy is a wonderful boy and every girl is a wonderful girl. These other things I can find out. So I find out about them, and I hope *Hashem* will help with the rest.”

What does that mean? On the main part, the part on which the children's lives will depend, you rely on someone saying that it's a good boy. But on everything around it, there you are stuck.

Sometimes people find the family, the money, the distinguished background, the status, all the things they wanted. By then, it becomes difficult to view the person objectively. “Of course it's good. Look at the family. And I asked about the boy too. They said he's fine.”

When someone buys a house, he may be so pleased with the price and the neighborhood that the house itself doesn't matter so much to him. Fine. Perhaps that works for him. But with a *shidduch*? The price is good, the neighborhood is good, and the house will be whatever it is? You have to know whether the person is what you are looking for.

Someone you can work things out with

Sometimes a person knows the particular thing he wants and thinks that is all he needs. “I just want a girl who looks good.” “I just want a boy who will sit and learn.” You may think that's all you need. It isn't all you need. There is a person with whom you will have to live.

I heard from *Rav* Dovid Schustal, in the name of his father-in-law, *Rav* Shneur Kotler, that the first thing to look for in a *shidduch* is someone with an easy nature.

I relate to that very much in the work I do. People come with a disagreement about going to the country, which school to send the children to, camp, money, a family issue, or a religious matter. And the whole marriage is caught up in it. “If only this issue would go away, everything would be fine.”

But why has the issue become so difficult to resolve? Often, one or both people find it hard to hear the other, to negotiate, to compromise, to be flexible.

An easy nature doesn't mean that someone has no opinion or gives everything up. It means you can speak to him. He can understand that someone else sees things differently. If something doesn't go his way, can he discuss it without becoming defensive? If another person wants something different, can he make room for that? Two people won't always agree. But an ordinary disagreement doesn't have to become an upheaval.

I've seen this outside marriage too. A business can have a good plan, good ideas, and good investments, while the relationships between the owner, managers, and employees keep everything from working. Sometimes people are in roles that don't suit them. Sometimes they aren't communicating properly. Once those things are understood and dealt with, the plans begin to work. The people involved make a tremendous difference.

Within that suitable range, don't overlook what it will be like to live with the person. A boy needs a wife. Looking for someone impressive enough to call a *rebbetzin* doesn't answer that question. There are people who are strong, confident, and respectful. They aren't weak or without opinions, but they aren't constantly defensive or fighting either. They can deal with a challenge without making the other person feel small.

My good friend Dr. David Lieberman made this point during a panel discussion about finding a good *shidduch*. People were discussing what matters in a match and what causes difficulties later. He said, “If you have two reasonably emotionally healthy people, you could pretty much get through just about anything. But if you're dealing with somebody who's not 100%, even the smallest thing is going to cause an earthquake.”

And he added, “End of the day is, you need people who are emotionally solvent in order for that marriage to optimize itself.”

I thought that was a very good way to put it. Sometimes we become so taken up with the particular issue that might come between a husband and wife that we give too little attention to the people who will have to deal with it.

My father-in-law, who should have a *refuah sheleimah*, told me a story he heard from his *rosh yeshivah*, *Rav Eliyahu Chazan*. *Rav Chazan* had accompanied a friend to *Rav Shimon Shkop* to ask about two suggestions. One was the daughter of a *rosh yeshivah*, a prestigious match. The other came from a simpler family, but it seemed that the girl herself might be easier to live with.

Rav Shimon generally didn't advise people which *shidduch* to choose, and he declined to decide. But the young man insisted that without his help, he wouldn't proceed with either.

Rav Shimon told him that he wouldn't decide which *shidduch* to make, but he would give him something to consider. If he married the daughter of the *rosh yeshivah*, he could have a very impressive wedding and, eventually, a very impressive funeral. The years in between would be so-so. If he married the girl from the simpler family, the wedding might not be so impressive, and neither would the funeral. But in between, he could have a real *chaim tovim*.

People are impressed when a *shidduch* is announced. They congratulate you, admire the family, and talk about what a wonderful match you made. But afterward they go home. Your child is the one who will be living with this person. Don't give the attention surrounding the marriage more weight than the life the couple will actually have together.

Don't build on changing someone

Everyone should work on himself. People can learn skills, improve habits, and become more considerate. But don't make a *shidduch* on the assumption that you will change the person's nature.

“After he marries, he'll settle down.” “Once she has a home, she'll become organized.” “My son will convince her. In our family we do things differently.” Was that discussed? Was it agreed upon? Is it even what the other family would expect?

Sometimes none of it was mentioned, and afterward everyone becomes frustrated. One person keeps asking for changes that were never agreed to. The other wonders why these demands are being made.

The same happens with personality. Someone fun-loving wants the spouse to stop being so dry. Someone organized wants the spouse to become naturally punctual. You can work together, but you can't begin by expecting the other person to become someone else.

This applies to your own child too. I hear it often from parents. “I'd like to send you my son. Please speak to him. He has to understand this and this. I've been trying to get through to him for years, and now he's getting married.”

I understand why it feels more urgent now. But if this is how your child has been for years, don't assume that a conversation with a *chosson* teacher or *kallah* teacher will change it. There may be things to learn and work on. That doesn't mean that someone can remake your child before the wedding.

And be just as careful when considering someone for your child. “It's a small thing. We'll send him to the right person. She'll speak to someone. It will all be taken care of.” Perhaps something can be helped. But if this matters enough that you wouldn't be comfortable with the person as he or she is now, don't base the decision on the hope that somebody will change it.

You can look for help and encourage growth. But you need to know whom you are considering, not only what everyone hopes that person will become.

At the same time, nobody can promise that a person will remain exactly as he is for fifty years. People grow, struggle, and change over time. Start with something real and workable. Don't begin with something you already find unsuitable and hope that marriage will make it suitable.

When someone comes from a good home and has had a good upbringing, there is something to start with, something to work with. You are beginning with a good foundation and hoping, with *Hashem's* help, to build from there.

There is no perfect *shidduch*

Look around your family, your *shul*, your neighborhood. Who is perfect? So why do people think that someone is suggesting the perfect person for their child?

Sometimes all the information comes in so beautifully. “The boy, the girl, the family—everything is amazing. I can't believe what we're getting.” Could be it's a wonderful *shidduch*. But if you think you found someone with every strength and no shortcomings, you aren't seeing the person clearly.

To return briefly to the house comparison, I once spoke to a young man who wanted an affordable house with enough room for his large family, a beautiful neighborhood, and exactly the kind of community he preferred. “Do you think there is such a house?” I asked. “Almost any house you find will be missing something.” “Yes,” he said. “I've already been looking for a few years.”

With people, it can be harder to recognize what we're asking for. We want a boy with *yiras Shamayim*, of course. But he should also be cheerful, not tense. Someone with good character who gives to others, but doesn't let people step on him. Someone close to his family, but not so close that his parents will control everything afterward.

A serious learner who also understands that at home he has a wife. A family whose standing will make us feel proud. There should be money, but not too much money, because that can bring other difficulties. He should be broad-minded because he's intelligent, but not have opinions we disagree with. Everything exactly where we would like it.

And then I hear, “We found everything we were looking for.” Where did you find such a person? I don't know such a person. You can find a very fine boy. Wonderful. But if you thought you found everything, it won't take long before you begin discovering things you didn't expect.

Sometimes it goes the other way. One suggestion is turned down because of the girl's appearance. Another because of something in the family. Another because the community isn't quite right. By the time you have turned down seven suggestions for seven different reasons, perhaps you are looking for someone who has none of those shortcomings. That means you are looking for perfection.

I'm not saying that every person who turns down several suggestions is doing something wrong. But if each is turned down for another reason, chances are that you might have too many top priorities.

Where is your list?

I sometimes ask people, “Where is your list? What is important to you? What must be there?” Everyone will have his own list. I don't think everyone should use the same one. Then everyone would be looking for the same boy or girl.

Know the difference between three things:

- What must be there.
- What you would strongly prefer, but could reconsider.

- What would be nice, but wouldn't justify turning down an otherwise suitable match.

You may also notice that something matters mainly to your father-in-law, or that you put it on the list because people say it is important. At least know why it is there and how much weight you intend to give it.

Otherwise, you hear something about the background, the grandparents, or the family, and now you don't want to continue. All right. Where was that on your list? Perhaps it was number twelve. You would have liked it, but you weren't going to turn down an otherwise suitable *shidduch* because of it.

If someone has the first four things on your list, that may be very suitable. If he has only the bottom five, having five out of ten doesn't necessarily help you. Sometimes people are really looking for a suggestion about which they won't hear anything they don't like. And when nobody tells them anything, they'll assume they know everything.

I spoke to a *ben Torah* from Lakewood who was looking for a *shidduch* for his daughter. There were things in the family that many people would not have considered overlooking. He was prepared to overlook them. He wanted a boy who could learn well, who was willing to live in Lakewood, and who would undertake to eat only *yoshon*. He found those three things and was ready to continue.

Someone else might smile at the third thing. But it was important to him. This was his list. A parent is entitled to have things that matter to him. Sometimes a matchmaker or someone else makes him feel foolish. “That's what you're standing on?” “Yes. This is important to me.”

Each family has its traditions, its standards, and the things it believes are right for its children. You should have someone wise and trustworthy to help you make sure that you are approaching it properly. But the fact that someone else would have made a different list doesn't by itself mean that yours is wrong.

Your child's priorities also belong in the discussion. Something that is first on your list may be much lower on his, and something you hardly considered may matter very much to her. We will discuss understanding your child in the next chapter. For now, remember whose married life you are considering.

On what are you compromising?

When people say that you have to compromise in *shidduchim*, it matters very much what you are compromising on. You can't have everything. But don't give up what really counts in order to keep the things around it.

Perhaps you would have preferred a different family background, more money, or something that would have made the match more impressive. Those may be places to reconsider. But the

person himself, his character, the ability to live together and work things out—don't lose sight of those because you feel that you have to settle.

This doesn't mean that every shortcoming in a person's nature makes the match unsuitable. Nobody is perfect. You need to understand which shortcomings can be lived with and which would interfere with building a good home. When something has to give, go back to what you decided was most important. And if your child's circumstances make that harder to assess, get guidance about what you should be looking for and where you can compromise.

When you have a choice

I'm not saying that you should disregard everything else. If you have suitable suggestions from the place you know, with the way of life you appreciate and the kind of family you feel comfortable with, why should you look for someone from somewhere entirely different?

It would be silly to say, “Just find someone with good character. It doesn't matter where he comes from, where he lives, what planet he's from.” Of course other things can matter. If you have many suitable suggestions and can find more of what you would like, by all means.

But there is a difference between having two suitable possibilities and choosing the one you prefer, and having one suggestion and deciding whether to turn it down. Sometimes a person speaks as though he can simply take whatever he wants. “What kind of boy should I take for my daughter?” What do you mean, take? What is being suggested? Who is interested? What is actually available?

When you have two suitable possibilities, you can consider which has more of the things you appreciate. But when one is being suggested, the question is whether the thing it is missing is a reason to say no. Those aren't the same question. And saying no is also a responsibility. You don't know what will be suggested afterward. You don't know whether this suggestion will still be available if you want to come back to it.

Even a small preference can distract you

Let's say my name is Gruen, and I want someone whose name also begins with a G. There are plenty of people with a G. It isn't so unrealistic. Between all those families, perhaps I'll find a very good *shidduch*.

But now I find someone with a G, and I'm hearing wonderful things. “I know the G isn't important. It was just my own foolishness. But I found it, and I'm hearing such good things.” Perhaps. But if you hadn't been looking for the G, would you hear the information the same way?

The G is an exaggerated example. But people have preferences about a certain kind of hat, a neighborhood, a community, or a kind of family. Sometimes those things represent something

genuinely important to you. If a particular way of life matters to you, it belongs in the equation. You don't have to pretend that it doesn't matter because someone else wouldn't put it on his list.

But sometimes you know that it isn't so important. You would simply enjoy having it. You relate to those people. You like the way it looks. You would feel good doing that kind of *shidduch*. That is where you need to be careful. Once you find it, the whole suggestion becomes more tempting, and everything you hear comes through that feeling.

“They're such a family. They live in that neighborhood. And I heard that he's a wonderful boy too.” Did you hear enough about the boy? Are you giving the same attention to the things that would have concerned you in another suggestion? Or have you become so pleased with what surrounds him that you're assuming the important things must be there too?

You may sincerely say, “Of course I wouldn't do a *shidduch* just because of the hat.” But it doesn't have to be your reason for doing it to affect your judgment. It can make you quicker to accept a compliment, explain away a concern, or feel that you have already found what you were looking for.

Something important deserves its place on your list. Something you would merely enjoy shouldn't quietly move ahead of what matters more. Sometimes it is worth looking past that preference so that you can hear more clearly what is being said about the person himself.

What will people say?

I saw a quotation from a great *Torah* scholar who was asked, “What is the first thing a person should be prepared to give up when it comes to a *shidduch*?” We know that we can't have everything. There is no perfect person. But what should come first?

“What will people say?”

I thought that was very good. Sometimes people understand that they can't have everything. But they don't realize how much of the difficulty is what other people will think.

“What will they say if we do a *shidduch* with that community? With that family? That height? That weight?” Someone shared with me something *Rav* Avigdor Miller said about a boy considering a girl who was overweight. He spoke about girls who are worth their weight in gold because they are so refined and have such fine character. Sometimes the thing everyone will notice distracts us from qualities that matter much more.

Minhag and *mesorah*

There are also things a person takes seriously because of his *minhag* and *mesorah*. I don't mean to put those together with wanting a particular initial. There is an *al titosh Toras imecha*. A

person may have a real reason to stand on an inherited practice even when it isn't a question of a clear prohibition.

I've seen people receive guidance to remain firm about such a practice, even when it made the search more difficult and cost them suggestions. On the other hand, a person can think that something requires him to turn down a *shidduch*, and with proper guidance discover that in his situation he should approach it differently.

You need a *Torah* perspective to make those distinctions. You can't decide that something doesn't matter merely because it isn't the most serious law. And you can't always decide on your own how much weight it should carry in this particular decision. Distinguishing a genuine religious commitment from a personal preference is itself something you may need help understanding.

Have someone to ask

There is a lot involved in making a *shidduch*: the child, the parents, the relationship between the parents, the child's wishes and needs, and the family. Each situation has its own people and considerations. What we are discussing can help you think about these things. It isn't individual guidance about a child I don't know and a situation I haven't heard.

Of course we pray. Without prayer and *Hashem's* help, we have nothing. But we also need someone to ask.

Sometimes people tell me, “Of course I ask before doing a *shidduch*. But I don't have a question yet. They only suggested the first twenty-two possibilities, and I didn't think they were suitable. When they suggest the right thing, I'll ask.”

Perhaps that itself is something to ask about. A person usually thinks that he is being reasonable. He thinks he is deciding with good judgment and responsibility. He doesn't necessarily notice where his own feelings are making the decision for him.

Having someone to ask isn't only for the times when you already know that you are uncertain. Sometimes you need help recognizing what you haven't considered. You don't need someone who can tell the future. You need someone knowledgeable and trustworthy, who understands the situation, means your good, and can help you see clearly when your own feelings make that difficult.

Chapter 2

A *shidduch* for your child

Knowing what matters in a *shidduch* is one thing. Now you need to understand what is good for your child. Very often people take so many things into account, and the last thing they come to is whether the boy and girl are suited to each other. “Of course I want my daughter to be happy. Of course I want something suitable for my son. That's also important.”

That is the first thing. That is what a *shidduch* means. Everything around it can also be important, but first you have to understand what your child needs.

A *shadchan* told me that he once suggested a *shidduch* to someone and began describing the family. The father was a *rav* of a large *shul*, with a distinguished family and relatives. The parent stopped him. “I want to tell you something. I like *kavod*. I like attention. I like pictures. I like people talking about me. Right now, I'm looking for a *shidduch* for my child. Do you have something for my child?”

He wasn't pretending that he didn't enjoy those things. He knew himself. But he also knew what he was doing now.

Sometimes people look at *shidduchim* as an opportunity to get a little more recognition. Perhaps now they'll become part of a certain circle. People will look at them differently. The *mechutan* is well respected. The family has a name. People will talk about it.

Nobody has to pretend that he doesn't care about his dignity or how people look at him. It's normal to want to feel good. But what are you looking for? A *shidduch* that will make you feel good? That will make your wife feel good? That your parents, your siblings, and the people in *shul* will be impressed with? You want a *shidduch* that a year from now, when everyone has forgotten about it, you will still feel good about.

What does your child need?

When I say that you are doing a *shidduch* for your child, I don't mean that your child necessarily knows better than you. Parents have experience. They've lived a married life. There may be things they understand that a young boy or girl doesn't yet understand.

I once spoke to an older *Litvishe bochur* about *shidduchim*. He told me that he understood the advantage of the way parents look for *shidduchim* in *Chassidishe* circles. A young person can become taken up with something that appeals to him and stop looking clearly at the rest. Parents are older. They have more experience, and they can sometimes look at the matter more responsibly.

I appreciated hearing that. But then the parents have to use that experience to think about what is good for the child. There is a difference between understanding what your child needs and wanting your child to want what you want.

Sometimes a parent says, “He wants something else because he's young. I know what's good for him.” Could be. Sometimes that is true. But sometimes what I call good for him is what I would like for myself. What does he need to be able to live normally, be satisfied, and grow? And what do I need? If those are two different things, you have to remember for whom you are making the *shidduch*.

You see it in other decisions about children too. A parent is choosing a school or *yeshivah*. If he thinks about his child's benefit, perhaps he would choose one place. Once he starts thinking about what people will say about him, his family, his status, he may choose somewhere else.

Money can enter into it too. Sometimes the place that would be better for the child costs more than the parent can manage. I understand. It's very difficult to make certain decisions when you don't have the money. Still, know what the priority is, and based on that, try to make the best decision possible.

How do you see your child?

Parents are very close to their children. We have a lot of feeling involved, and it affects how we see them. The same boy, with exactly the same strengths and shortcomings, might look very different to you if he were your neighbor's son or your nephew.

And it goes both ways. Some parents see only good. Someone complains about the child, and the child is never at fault. The *rebbi*, the teacher, the *menahel*—whoever says something must have misunderstood. It's a beautiful thing to see good in your child. Love your children, appreciate their strengths, and let them know it. But when you are looking for a *shidduch*, you also have to know whether you are seeing clearly.

“Do you know what kind of boy I have? You are suggesting that for him?” Sometimes the parent can't understand why other people aren't as impressed. He explains to every *shadchan* how special his child is and why the suggestions aren't good enough.

I once spoke to someone who was putting out a product. He asked me what I thought, and I told him that I wasn't sure people would appreciate certain things about it. “You aren't the first person to say that,” he told me. “But I'll explain why it's a mistake. My way is really better.”

Could be. But to how many people will you explain it? Will you stand in the store and explain to every customer why he should want what you are offering? The same thing can happen with *shidduchim*. You can keep explaining why everyone should be impressed with your child. But if they aren't seeing what you see, you have to take that into account too.

And sometimes you see every shortcoming

Other parents have the opposite difficulty. “How can I marry him off? Who will be able to live with him?” I hear it about responsibility, time management, sensitivity, honesty, learning, and all sorts

of things. Sometimes the parent has become so taken up with a particular difficulty that he can hardly see anything else.

I spoke to a father who felt that his son had a tremendous problem. “Do the *bochurim* in *yeshivah* think he has a problem?” “No. They think very highly of him.” “The *maggid shiur*? The people who know him there?” “They all say he's a *metziah*.” “Does he feel that he has a problem? Is he suffering?” “No. He's happy, he's calm, he's learning, he's growing.”

So who is making him into a problem? Sometimes a parent is very different from the child. The father is a tremendous *masmid*, or very responsible with money. The mother is exceptionally organized. Compared with them, the child seems very lacking.

Sometimes the parent is the one affected by the child's difficulty, so it becomes personal. Sometimes he worries about what people will say about him. And sometimes he sees his own shortcomings in the child, and that bothers him even more. “I know where this can lead. I have the same problem.” But you found a way to manage. Perhaps your child can too.

An older *Yid* once told me, after I gave him a sincere compliment about his son, “Shimon, a person is never satisfied with his own child.” I wouldn't say that nobody is satisfied. *Baruch Hashem*, parents have *nachas* and appreciate their children. But even while seeing the good, we often notice things that we wish were better. You don't have to like every shortcoming. But you need to know how serious it really is.

Hear what other people see

“Nobody knows my child like I do. Nobody has to deal with him like I do.” Could be you know things other people don't know. There are people who behave beautifully outside and are very difficult at home. When they marry, the way they behave at home may be very relevant to how they will behave with a spouse. I'm not saying to disregard what happens in your home because the *yeshivah* says he's wonderful.

But sometimes you are too close to assess it clearly. Someone once described a parent to me as controlling, aggressive, a terrible person. I happened to speak to someone who knew that parent closely and had worked with him for years, through good times and difficult times. He had a very different description.

That doesn't prove that everything at home was fine. It does show that one description may not be the whole picture. Closeness can make something look much larger than it looks from a little farther away. A comment, waking up late, a way of doing something—you don't have to appreciate it, but perhaps it isn't as terrible as it feels to you.

Listen to people who know your child. Does he get along with others? Does he function? Do they also see the difficulty? If they don't, and he is managing well, that is information too.

What does your child say?

Sometimes parents tell me a whole story about what the father wants and what the mother wants, and I haven't heard what the child thinks.

There is an old joke about a man being asked his age at the border. He stands there thinking. “What are you thinking about?” “I can't decide whether to say that I'm older or younger.” “Why don't you say how old you are?” “Oh. I didn't think of that.” Sometimes we work through all the possibilities and don't ask the simple question.

What does your son want? Does your daughter have a feeling about this? Perhaps the child has no strong preference and wants you to guide him. Fine. But perhaps something matters very much to him, and you haven't asked.

I once heard the point made about parents getting involved in the names their married children give their babies: if they are old enough to have children, they are old enough to name them. It doesn't mean they shouldn't ask for advice. But if someone is old enough to marry, his thoughts about the life he is going to live deserve to be heard.

You may think a preference is immature. Sometimes it is. But the person is marrying now, at his present age and stage. I've seen things that seemed small to the parents become real difficulties afterward because the child never wanted them.

You should educate your children and give over what you believe is right. That responsibility doesn't disappear. But children are people, with minds and choices of their own. They aren't pieces you can move into place and expect to remain there forever.

Sometimes we expect our children to be a continuation of ourselves, while forgetting that we made decisions different from our own parents. You may believe that your changes were in the right direction. Still, the fact remains that you made choices, and your children may make choices too. Try to give over the understanding, the feeling, and the desire for what you believe in. But don't assume that controlling the circumstances now will settle everything for the rest of their lives.

What kind of home does your child want?

There is also a broader question than whether your child likes a particular suggestion. What kind of home does he want? What matters to your daughter in the life she hopes to build? Understanding your child includes hearing those wishes, rather than only deciding what kind of person would be good for him.

An older *bochur* wrote to me that he came from a fine, *frum* home, but his own outlook wasn't exactly like his parents'. They were looking for the kind of girl they thought would suit him, and he didn't know how to explain that it wasn't what he needed. He was prepared to fit in outwardly

with the community. He understood that leaving it would carry a price. But he didn't want a marriage in which he had to hide his outlook from his wife.

I deliberately left out the particular examples when discussing his question. Otherwise, people become taken up with the example and stop hearing the question. One person begins arguing about a particular way of dressing, another about a particular place. But the question is how to approach a real difference between the people who are going to live together.

Children aren't always like their parents. You may have hoped otherwise, but looking for a *shidduch* for the child you hoped he would be doesn't make that difference disappear. Differences in religious outlook can cause real suffering in a marriage. Not every difference means that only one person could possibly be following *Torah*. That doesn't mean everyone is right or that people may do whatever they like. People have obligations. But you need to understand the actual person and the actual question.

The *bochur* needed to be open with his parents, respectfully and with help if necessary. Hiding from them and then hiding from his wife wasn't a way to begin a married life. It wasn't fair to the girl either. Not everything has to be said, but you need to be able to speak with the person you marry. Are you finding someone with whom your child can be open, or someone from whom he already expects to hide?

I also told him that saying, “My father's way isn't for me,” isn't enough. What is your way? Who is your *rav*? Who is your *moreh derech*? It doesn't necessarily have to be the father's *rav*. But he needs someone who understands him and whom he takes seriously. That doesn't mean finding someone who will allow everything. It means accepting guidance and living within it. A family and community can provide a valuable framework. Being able to do whatever you want isn't necessarily good for you.

A young person's present wish isn't necessarily what he will want five years from now. He also needs help thinking about what will be good for him beyond what appeals to him this minute. Taking his wishes seriously doesn't mean leaving him without guidance. It means that the guidance has to address the child who is there.

Don't use the *shidduch* to change your child

Someone told me about a very *frum* father whose daughter wasn't on the same level of religious observance. He found her a very *frum* husband, and there were generations of *frum* children from that marriage. It worked in that sense. But the daughter herself never became very *farfrumt*. The marriage hadn't changed her into what her father wanted her to be.

I've seen many cases where parents hoped the spouse would put things in place, and it didn't work. “After the wedding, he won't have a choice.” Instead, there was strain between husband and wife, different messages to the children, and more difficulties. Sometimes the pressure made the child even more resistant. A more suitable match might have allowed both people to be calmer and grow better.

You should be *mechanech* your children and give over what you believe is right. I'm not saying that from the beginning a child should choose every part of his upbringing. But once he is telling you that something doesn't fit him, you have a situation to address.

It's like a child asking a question in *emunah* and being told, “In our home, we didn't ask those questions.” Perhaps you didn't. But he has already asked. Making him quiet doesn't answer him. You can say, “We didn't discuss this, but I see that it bothers you. Let's ask the *rav*.”

Work with the child you have

Even a person who has worked on himself still has his own nature. Working on yourself doesn't mean that all people eventually become the same person. And when it comes to your children, *chanoch lana'ar al pi darko*. You need to know how to work with the child, not how to break him.

Sometimes a person becomes very taken up with the idea of breaking his nature. When it comes to himself, he has already given up. But his children—he is going to make them change every part of their nature, because there is one exact way things should be done.

That doesn't bring good results. Help a child grow and work on himself while understanding the strengths and the nature that *Hashem* gave him. You should certainly work on something that leads you to neglect *Torah* and *mitzvos*. But don't spend your life hating yourself because a particular quality comes more easily to someone else.

I spoke with a *yungerman* who kept trying to reach a certain level in serving *Hashem*. It wasn't a question of an *aveirah*. The effort had begun to bring him down so much that a great *Torah* scholar advised him, for the time being, to put that particular effort aside.

There are so many promises about how easily people can lose weight, gain confidence, and manage their time. If everything worked as easily as the advertisements sound, nobody would still be struggling. People can work hard and improve without becoming perfect. They also have natural strengths that can be used well, instead of putting all their attention into the things that come hardest to them.

The same applies to the child for whom you are looking. Recognize who she is. Don't keep eating yourself up over her nature, and don't keep eating her up over it either. You are trying to find a suitable person for your child, with the nature, needs, and wishes that are actually hers.

Chapter 3

Readiness and compatibility

A parent asked me about a daughter. The girl was a *farshlepte*; everything was last minute. Would it be a problem to look for a boy who was punctual and organized?

It's a good question. You are thinking about what would be suitable for your child. But before answering it, there are a few things to understand. First, what does last minute mean? Is she late, or does she get there at the last minute? Does she get to work on time, but with a parent watching all the stress beforehand?

You may not like how she does things. I understand. But we need to know what the difficulty actually is, how much it affects her life, and how much it bothers you.

And then, what kind of organized boy are we talking about? Someone who will become nervous with her and keep putting her down? Or someone who can be helpful, and she will appreciate that he takes a little more responsibility? There isn't one answer for every punctual boy and every last-minute girl.

They don't have to be exactly alike

Sometimes parents aren't looking for perfect people, but they are looking for perfect compatibility. “My daughter needs someone exactly like this. Otherwise, what if he wants one thing and she wants another?” They will want different things. They are two people.

There is a joke about a *chosson* who complained, “My father married my mother. My grandfather married my grandmother. And for me they found a stranger.” It is a joke, but sometimes people really expect everything to fit without any adjustment.

Does the last-minute daughter need someone similar, so they won't become nervous with each other? Or someone different, to provide balance? Either can work. Either can also be difficult.

A *yungerman* from a troubled background told me that when it came to his *shidduch*, they found someone with similar difficulties. They thought the two would understand each other. “It's like taking someone who limps and finding him another person who limps to help him walk,” he told me. “We both need help. Neither of us has the strength to help the other.”

That was his experience. It doesn't mean that two people with similar difficulties can never understand and help each other. Sometimes they do.

I also know a case where a parent felt that the child wasn't strong enough in his opinions. He needed someone very strong-minded to settle things in the home. It brought years of strain. The less definite person couldn't tolerate the forcefulness, and the forceful person couldn't tolerate the uncertainty. Looking for the opposite isn't automatically the answer either.

A balance or another difficulty?

Sometimes one person spends too freely, and a more careful spouse provides a helpful balance. Sometimes both are easygoing about time and don't become upset with each other. Sometimes a person who does everything at the last minute appreciates a spouse who helps things happen earlier.

But a punctual person may also keep criticizing the less punctual spouse, who in turn becomes nervous with all the exactness. Even when two people are both called very *frum*, they may be particular about different things and unable to tolerate each other's approach. Similar descriptions don't tell you how the people will manage together.

Sometimes putting two very intense people together makes things more extreme. You thought that because both are very *frum*, they would understand each other. But perhaps each has a certain harshness in his approach, and together it becomes harder.

And sometimes a difference provides a helpful balance. It depends on the people. You need *siyata d'Shmaya* to understand when being similar will help them and when being different will help them. Are they patient? Can they make room for each other? Can they appreciate what the other brings?

Strong doesn't have to mean difficult

When a child has a difficulty, people sometimes begin looking for a match with a corresponding difficulty. “My child isn't perfect. I'll have to compromise.” All right. On what are you compromising?

Are you becoming less particular about status, money, or background so that you can find someone who will be good for your child? Or are you accepting a difficulty that will make life harder for a child who already struggles?

It isn't enough to hear, “A *ba'al middos*,” and stop there. What kind of person is he? What is she like when something doesn't go her way? Is this someone who could bring out the better side of your child?

I'm not giving a formula of which personality color should marry which color. You are trying to understand the people. Even the same description can come from different places. A *bochur* may want someone open-minded and find a girl who seems to have the openness he wants. But what about her character, her judgment, her ability to function? What is behind that openness?

Two people can both be in Arizona. One is enjoying a vacation. The other came because he is unwell and needs the climate. Being in the same place doesn't tell you how they got there or

what else comes with it. The same applies to a description that sounds suitable: you still need to understand what it means about this particular person.

Ready doesn't mean finished

Sometimes parents hold back from *shidduchim* because their child isn't as mature or as responsible as they would like. “We'll wait a little. He's not ready.” Perhaps he isn't. There are serious difficulties that need individual guidance. But first understand what “not ready” means. Is there something particular that needs attention, or are you hoping that another year will simply make everything easier?

Of course, people can become more mature with time. They gain experience, understand more, and learn to manage things better. If that were the only consideration, you could keep waiting. Perhaps at forty a person would be more prepared in certain ways than he was at twenty. But becoming as prepared as possible isn't the only consideration.

Were you completely ready when you got married? A boy goes from *cheder* into *yeshivah* when the time comes. He may need time to get used to it. The first days or the first *zman* may be difficult. That doesn't necessarily mean he should have remained in *cheder* until everything about him was settled.

Marriage is also part of the normal course of life. A boy and girl marry, and they grow up together. Sometimes certain foundations develop precisely because they are building a home together. Waiting for more maturity also means postponing those years of building and growing within a marriage. And a suitable suggestion available now may not remain available later. You need to consider what may be lost as well as what you hope will be gained.

I once spoke to an older *bochur* who had had more time to develop very definite opinions. Now every suggestion brought another reason why the girl wouldn't understand him. He felt fortunate that he hadn't married younger. “Imagine if I had married at eighteen, and now I would think differently from my wife.”

But often that isn't how it develops. When people marry younger and get along, their way of looking at things develops together. Waiting doesn't automatically solve a difficulty. Sometimes being stuck, alone, and discouraged makes it harder. The same child who had a difficulty at eighteen may still have it later, with additional difficulties from the waiting.

And sometimes other things change during that time. A boy or girl may become involved in things or face challenges that weren't there before. You expected the waiting to make marriage easier, but now there is more to contend with. That doesn't mean this will happen to everyone. It means that time doesn't only bring possible benefits.

None of this is a rule to marry off every child immediately. Marriage won't automatically resolve a serious difficulty, and sometimes waiting is appropriate. But if something needs attention first,

understand what it is. What are you hoping will change? Is something being done to help that happen? What would tell you that it is time to consider beginning?

Hear what your child is saying and get guidance about the actual circumstances. There is a difference between not being ready and not being as ready as you would like. Postponing a *shidduch* is also a decision, and it needs to be considered properly.

Preparation and experience

Nor does the amount of preparation tell you everything. Today a *chosson* can have many hours of classes, recordings, *sefarim*, and guidance. That doesn't give him all the judgment that comes with experience.

I remember a young *bochur* coming with his father, certain that his father didn't understand *shidduchim*. The father had already married off children and had experience in life. The *bochur* wasn't really asking whether his father might be right. He wanted me to explain to his father why he was wrong.

Being old enough to marry doesn't mean that a person no longer needs guidance. But needing guidance doesn't mean he must wait until he has the wisdom of an old man before marrying.

Someone once told me about sessions being offered to prepare children for the trauma of an *upsherin*, for five hundred dollars. I remarked that perhaps years later people would go for help because nobody had asked whether they wanted their hair cut. We can become so taken up with preparing for every stage that we forget that people also grow by going through the ordinary stages of life. Preparation has its place, but it can't give someone all the experience of being married before he marries.

When the difficulty is honesty

Let's consider a particular difficulty. A parent wrote about a daughter who was giving, helpful, intelligent, and easygoing, but who said many untruths. Sometimes about small things, sometimes more seriously. She knew it was a problem and was already getting help, but the parents weren't seeing a change. Should they postpone *shidduchim*?

First you need to know what “constantly lying” means. Is every answer untrue? Is there a serious pattern that makes it impossible to trust the person? Or are we talking about excuses when she feels caught, exaggerations, or making a story fit the way she would like it to be?

I'm not saying those things are fine. Truth is tremendously important in a relationship. But you need to know what kind of difficulty you are discussing and how much it interferes with living with the person. There can be a severe pattern that is part of a much larger problem. That needs proper individual assessment and guidance. It isn't something to dismiss because people sometimes exaggerate.

But sometimes a parent is very exact about the truth and sees every inaccurate word as proof that the child can't be trusted at all. Meanwhile, he explains his own inaccuracies very comfortably. Here it was *darchei shalom*. There it was only a small thing. He didn't mean it that way. We need to be honest about that too. Those explanations shouldn't become a way to dismiss a genuine problem with trust.

Someone says, “I'm coming soon,” and you know that for him soon means half an hour. Perhaps you wish he would express it differently. Still, understanding how he speaks may help you deal with him without making every instance into a whole fight.

I remember an *ehrlicher Yid* telling me as a *chosson* to give my wife a later time than the time I expected to arrive home. He put it very strongly: if you think eight, say ten. The point was to allow for the fact that things don't always happen as you plan, instead of repeatedly creating an expectation you won't meet.

On the other hand, I appreciate it very much when someone tells me, “If my wife said it, I know it's true.” Or, “I couldn't hide that from my husband.” That trust and openness are precious. Understanding that people have shortcomings doesn't make honesty less important.

Can the child acknowledge it?

The parent who wrote about the daughter said that she knew she had a problem and was trying to work on it. That matters. There is a difference between someone who recognizes a wrong and someone who insists that everything he does is right.

When a person acknowledges it, you can discuss what happened and what might help next time. It isn't enough to say, “I know I have that problem, but…” But what? Something still needs to be done. Yet willingness to acknowledge it and work on it gives you something with which to work.

Sometimes, when a person keeps justifying something, more explanations don't help. He has an answer for every explanation. In an ordinary relationship difficulty, you may need to say clearly and respectfully, “Perhaps you don't see anything wrong with it, but it bothers me. Please don't do it.”

With a child who is already admitting a difficulty, there is room for encouragement. “You were open about that. That's very good.” “You tried. This time you told the truth.” Instead, parents sometimes say, “How will you ever get married? Who will be able to live with you?”

Besides being discouraging, those words can remain in the child's mind and make him frightened about marriage. Frightening him isn't the same as helping him improve.

And ask yourself whether it is safe for the child to tell you the truth. If admitting what happened always brings a scolding, perhaps he has learned to protect himself with a different account. I've heard *mechanchim* encourage parents to recognize the truth-telling even when the child is

admitting that he broke something or did something wrong. Let him know that telling the truth doesn't only make things worse for him.

Does he speak the same way in school and with friends? Or is this particularly how he manages when he feels caught at home? That is also something to understand.

Is the help helping?

A *chosson rebbi*, *kallah* teacher, therapist, or mentor isn't going to remake the child for you. Sometimes parents hope that finding the right person to help will settle everything. Once the child has the right therapist or teacher, the problem will be gone, and then they can begin *shidduchim*.

Help can be valuable. But the child also has to do the work. A dietitian can give a plan and encouragement; the person still has to follow it. Finding someone with the right title doesn't do that part for him.

I read an article by a therapist who pointed out that the person's qualifications don't by themselves tell you whether he will understand you and be able to help you. You need someone you can work with and from whom you are seeing progress.

I've told people who come to me, particularly about difficulties at home, that if they don't see a change within two or three weeks, they shouldn't simply keep coming back to me. I want them to see that something is being accomplished. It isn't a *mitzvah* to continue indefinitely, hoping that one day the help will begin to help.

You can also try to put your child in touch with a suitable mentor, someone who can guide him and be available when he needs help. That's part of trying to help. It doesn't mean the mentor has magic, or that your child will suddenly accept everything he is told.

Sometimes a real difficulty remains. What needs to be said about it, and whether a particular *shidduch* can be suitable with that knowledge, requires its own guidance. Hoping to hide it or waiting indefinitely for it to disappear aren't the only possibilities. We will discuss being open about difficulties separately.

When the situation isn't typical

There are also situations that aren't the usual *shidduch* question. A child has a serious difficulty, a health condition, or something else that changes what needs to be considered. Sometimes the question is whether to proceed with a younger child's *shidduchim* while an older child is still waiting. These aren't all the same question, and there isn't one answer for all of them.

Precisely because these situations aren't typical, people often have less experience dealing with them. They may be responsible, sensible parents who have already married off children, but this

is something they haven't faced before. That is a reason to get guidance early, before making assumptions and decisions that become difficult to undo.

What does this particular difficulty mean? How does it affect what would be suitable? What needs attention before proceeding? What can be worked with? You need someone who understands the actual circumstances and can help you consider them with sound judgment and proper *Torah* guidance.

Sometimes a parent says, “I know that we'll have to settle.” All right. On what? Being prepared to give up some of what you hoped for doesn't mean accepting something that will make your child's life harder.

You may need to become less particular about things surrounding the *shidduch* while being especially careful about the person with whom your child will live. Compromising on family status is one thing. Accepting a nature that will make daily life harder for your child is another. Don't assume that because your child has a difficulty, another difficulty is what you should accept.

Understand what matters in this situation and get help deciding where there is room to compromise.

What can these two people build together?

When the couple is already married, they can try to appreciate what they have. If both are similar, perhaps they understand each other. If they are different, perhaps there is a useful balance.

A careful spouse may help someone who spends freely. A spouse who spends more easily may make sure things are bought that the other would never have bought. That doesn't remove every irritation. But sometimes a person is so busy being upset about the difference that he misses the good it brings.

Before the *shidduch*, you need to understand whether these two people can work together. Sometimes similarity helps. Sometimes a difference helps. Know the child, understand the person being suggested, and discuss the actual question with someone who can help you assess it.

Chapter 4

Two parents, one *shidduch*

There are hopefully two parents looking for a *shidduch* for one child. Each has experience, feelings, and things that matter to him or her. You may both want what is good for your child and still have very different ideas about what that means. That is something you need to know how to work with from the beginning of the search.

In other areas of life, perhaps you have found a way to manage your differences. You do some things your way, your spouse does some things differently, and you give each other room. Perhaps there are things you have never really agreed about. But now you have to find a *shidduch* for your child together. You don't have to settle every difference in your marriage before you can proceed, but you do need a way to make this decision.

I see so many situations where the search becomes slower and more complicated because the parents haven't worked out that part. One is looking in one direction, the other won't consider it. A suggestion comes up, one wants to proceed, the other says no, and they get stuck. Sometimes the difficulty isn't finding a suitable suggestion. It is that the parents don't know how to work together on it.

What worked until now may not work here

Very often, a husband and wife have lived with a difference for years. “I do things my way. She does things her way. We manage.” That can be fine when both understand and accept the arrangement. You don't have to think alike about everything. But what happens when the question concerns both of you? What kind of *chinuch*? Which school? What kind of *shidduch*?

Now you are arguing about the child, but perhaps the disagreement began between the two of you long before that. You never really discussed it. You didn't agree, compromise, or work out how to manage it. You got through the years, and now it has become something you can't leave alone in the same way.

It would have been better to understand it earlier. But even now, deal with what is between you instead of making the whole disagreement into a question about the child. There is also confusion for the child when the parents are giving different messages. The *shidduch* already has enough to consider without carrying an unresolved argument between the parents too.

It belongs to both of you

Sometimes a husband says, “Until now, I let my wife do things her way. But when it comes to the children, this is how it's going to be.” What happened? Until now it was something personal. Now it concerns both of you. But the fact that it isn't only hers doesn't make it only yours. And the same applies in the other direction.

There is another mistake people make. Because they understand that they can't decide alone, they feel they can't say anything. “What should I do? My wife won't hear of that kind of *shidduch*. It's too difficult. I'm not getting involved.” The fact that you can't make the decision on your own doesn't mean the other person should make it on her own.

It can be a beautiful thing to give in. If you understand the other person's feeling and are comfortable letting it go, fine. But sometimes a person is withdrawing because he doesn't know how to deal with the disagreement, even though he believes something important is being lost. A *shidduch* for your child is too important to leave at, “What can I do?”

Giving each other room in your personal choices doesn't answer how you will deal with something that belongs to both of you. That needs an understanding too. Neither parent should be taking over the whole decision, and neither should feel that having a partner means having no say.

How will you make the decision?

You can discuss the question until you come to an understanding with which you are both happy. You can compromise; perhaps neither gets everything he or she wanted, but both understand that this is the right way to proceed. Or you can agree to go to someone you both trust and accept guidance, even if it doesn't come out the way one of you hoped. But you need a way to make the decision.

“I'm not comfortable with you deciding, so I'm deciding” doesn't work for either side. You have a partner in life, another parent who has an opinion and may see something you aren't seeing. Both need to be taken seriously.

And not proceeding also affects the child. You can't leave the search stuck indefinitely because you haven't found a way to discuss it. Sometimes you need help with the disagreement itself before you can work out the practical question. You may not begin with the same opinion, but you can agree on how you are going to work through it. Otherwise, each new suggestion can bring you back to the same place.

When you disagree about readiness

We discussed the question of readiness earlier. Sometimes both parents feel that their child needs more time. But when one wants to begin looking and the other says, “He's not ready,” you also need to understand what each of you means.

One may be concerned about ordinary responsibilities, while the other is thinking about age, confidence, or whether the child wants to marry. You can argue about readiness for a long time while answering entirely different questions.

Sometimes the reasons keep changing. You discuss one concern, and another takes its place. There may be several genuine difficulties that need attention. But a longer list doesn't by itself make the case stronger. Ask, “If we addressed this, would you feel comfortable beginning?” If the answer is still no, try to understand what else is holding things up.

Don't assume that the parent who wants to wait is simply overprotective, or that the parent who wants to proceed is only worried about what people will say. And don't leave out what your child is telling you. Bring the concerns clearly to someone you both trust, including what each parent hopes to accomplish by proceeding or waiting. You need guidance about the actual child and the actual question.

What are you trying to decide?

A father wrote to me that his son was an exceptional boy, and they were receiving many good suggestions. He was more *Chassidish* than the family his wife came from. He belonged to a particular community and wore a particular style of clothing. His wife was considering girls from homes with a fancier style, and it bothered him.

She argued that their son wasn't necessarily obligated to follow his father's way of dressing, since the father himself had changed from the way he was brought up.

There were a few different questions in that letter. What was the son obligated to do? How were the parents going to deal with their different expectations? And what kind of *shidduch* was actually good for their son? If you put everything together and simply ask who is right, it becomes difficult to understand what needs to be worked out.

There are questions here that belong to a *rav*. *Al titosh Toras imecha* is a real consideration. There are matters of *minhag*, *mesorah*, and what a child was taught that he cannot simply disregard because he prefers something else. There are also things that don't come into that category. If you *daven* in a certain *shul* or *shuckel* a certain way, it doesn't automatically mean that your child has to do exactly the same.

The fact that a father changed something from his own upbringing doesn't by itself settle every question about what his children should do. Nor does saying, “This is what I do,” establish that every detail is binding on them. First get the actual question clear and receive the appropriate guidance. Even when something is important and should be followed, you still need to think about how to give it over and what you can accomplish.

Different feelings about *frumkeit*

Sometimes what the parents are discussing isn't an obligation. It is a style, an attitude, a feeling for certain things. I want to be clear about what I mean. I'm putting aside what is stated in *Shulchan Aruch*, an established custom or tradition, and things that have an actual basis for how they should be done. Those need their own consideration.

But there are also things people associate with the word *frum* that have to do with personality and taste. How much someone *shuckels*, a certain style of music, a certain look, a particular way of expressing warmth. One person likes it very much. Another doesn't relate to it in the same way. That doesn't necessarily mean the first person has more *yiras Shamayim*, or that the second lost his feeling for *Yiddishkeit*.

I sometimes compare it to different flavors of ice cream. Personally, I think warmth, *frumkeit*, *Chassidishkeit*, and that feeling for *ehrlichkeit* are a wonderful flavor. They can be helpful, bring a person to good things, and protect him from things that aren't good. But there is still a part of it that is a feeling, a flavor.

I'm not comparing someone who wears a proper *yarmulke* with someone whose *yarmulke* can hardly be noticed. But within a reasonable range, exactly how large it is can have to do with what a person likes. It isn't necessarily a measurement of his *yiras Shamayim*.

Sometimes a husband likes things warmer and more *Chassidish*, and his wife likes what she sees as more ordinary or accepted. Sometimes it is the wife who appreciates the extra seriousness, and her husband is more relaxed about those things. It doesn't follow that one fears *Hashem* more than the other.

“But I don't just like it. I believe in it. It's hard for me too.” I understand that it's hard for you. But you appreciate it enough to do it despite the difficulty. You may be asking someone else to do the same difficult thing without having the feeling for it that you have.

You are entitled to believe in what you believe in. You should try to give your children the warmth and attitude you appreciate. Be that kind of person yourself, and bring them up with it. But remember that there is a limit to how much you can give another person a particular feeling. You see the different attitudes in any *shul* or community. Adults don't all become the same. That includes your spouse, and eventually your children too.

You may still have to decide what kind of *shidduch* to consider. But trying to make your spouse feel exactly as you do isn't necessarily how you will reach that decision.

Leading a home

Understanding that some differences involve personal feeling doesn't remove the need to make a shared decision. There is also a *Torah* understanding of a husband's role in a Jewish home. A husband should lead, and a wife should have *derech eretz* for him and for the things that matter to him. I don't want to leave that out.

But leading doesn't mean controlling, and being at the head doesn't mean dictating. Both need to understand their part. None of this is a reason to control, mistreat, or abuse the other person.

I wouldn't take the father's letter and answer simply that his wife must do whatever he says. We still need to understand the religious obligation, the relationship between the parents, and what

is suitable for the child. These things need to work together within the relationship that the *Torah* wants a husband and wife to have. They aren't a reason to stop listening to each other.

A discussion isn't a courtroom

I spoke to a *yungerman* who was spending a great deal of time looking up sources and making calls about standards and communal rules at home. He wanted to know who held what, so he could come home and present his case, as though he were in a courtroom.

If there is a question of *halachah*, ask it. But when you are dealing with different feelings and attitudes, the argument often isn't going to accomplish what you hope. You may have sources. The other person may have sources too. There may be different opinions, distinctions, or circumstances you haven't considered. And even when you have explained your position, you haven't necessarily changed how the other person feels.

There are practical things you can discuss. “This matters to me.” “We began with a certain understanding. Before changing it, we need to discuss how it affects us.” You can ask for something. You can make clear that a shared decision needs to be worked out properly. But debating whose feeling is more justified isn't always going to get you there.

When it comes to the *shidduch*, bring the discussion back to what you are trying to decide. What matters to each of you? Which part is an obligation, which part is a preference, and what does your child need? You aren't required to become the same person. You need to find a way to act together as this child's parents.

Your child needs the benefit of both your experience and your concern. Don't let the search become stuck on which parent will win. Hear each other, clarify the question, and get help where you need it, so that you can move forward with something you both understand to be good for your child.

Chapter 5

Being realistic about the search

A person can know very clearly what he wants and still have difficulty finding a *shidduch*. Sometimes what he is looking for doesn't exist. Sometimes it exists, but it isn't suitable for his child. And sometimes it is exactly what he wants, but the other family doesn't want him. That is also part of looking for a *shidduch*.

It takes a certain maturity to say, “I would like many things, but I see that it isn't going exactly the way I hoped.” You may understand that very quickly when someone else has unrealistic expectations. With your own child, it can be harder to recognize.

Are people thinking of you?

Some people become so occupied with finding a *shidduch* that it takes over their lives. They pay people to search for them, approach everyone they meet, and seem to feel that unless they keep pushing every minute, nothing will happen. That isn't what I'm suggesting. We need *bitachon*. We aren't arranging the whole outcome ourselves.

But there is also ordinary *hishtadlus*. Do the people who might suggest something know that you have a child who is ready? Have you let them know that you would appreciate hearing suggestions? Many *shadchanim* are very busy. They have many people to think about, and they may not even know that you are looking. A telephone call, sending your child's information, or getting in touch from time to time can be a normal part of the search.

As time goes on, you begin to see what is happening. Some families receive many calls. People know the child, are impressed with the family, and are eager to suggest something. Other families hear much less. That doesn't establish your child's worth, but it does tell you something about how much attention the search is receiving. You need to recognize your circumstances rather than assume that everyone will have you in mind without being reminded.

I've spoken to people who were waiting and waiting. “Are you doing anything about it?” “No.” Sometimes that simply isn't reasonable. You don't have to become anxious or spend the whole day making calls. But if very few suggestions are coming, perhaps you need to reach out instead of continuing to wait for people to approach you.

You may send information to someone, and the *shidduch* will eventually come through an entirely different person. That doesn't mean the effort was pointless. We don't know which effort will lead somewhere. Sometimes that telephone call does make the difference. You can rely on *Hashem* while doing the ordinary things that give people an opportunity to think of your child.

What is our part?

We know that *Hashem* brings people together in marriage. How that works together with our choices isn't something we fully understand. If a person keeps turning down suggestions and eventually marries much later, what was *bashert*? What depended on his choices? We don't have to resolve every part of that question before accepting that we have a responsibility to act properly.

The *Pele Yoetz*, discussing marriage, describes three kinds of decrees. Sometimes good is decreed for a person and will reach him despite his efforts in the other direction. Sometimes a

difficulty is decreed and cannot be avoided. And sometimes the outcome depends on the person's requests and efforts.

We don't know which applies to us. He therefore tells us to take seriously the possibility that we belong to the third category, where what we do matters. Believing that *Hashem* arranges marriages doesn't mean sitting back. Perhaps the good outcome is meant to come through making the appropriate inquiries, considering a suggestion responsibly, or letting someone know that we are looking.

This doesn't mean becoming obsessed or imagining that we control the result. Everything remains in *Hashem's* hands. But our *hishtadlus* may be part of how He intends the *shidduch* to come about.

Sometimes a person says, “If it's *bashert*, it will happen,” and feels that he doesn't need to do anything. But when he thinks someone stood in the way of a *shidduch*, he becomes very upset with that person. What happened to the *bitachon* then? It's worth noticing whether we rely on it particularly when there is something we don't want to do. We don't use *bitachon* as a reason to avoid a responsibility we find difficult.

Being careful isn't the problem

Someone once asked me why *shidduchim* seem to go more slowly than they used to. I had asked a person involved in helping with *shidduchim* the same question. He told me, with a smile, that earlier generations sometimes approached things with a little more *chap-shlap*. Someone suggested something, it more or less fit, and they went ahead.

Today people want to understand everything more carefully. Perhaps they know more, hear more, or are more frightened. Whatever the reason, taking more responsibility can mean that things take longer.

Could be. But that doesn't mean the answer is to put two people together without understanding what you are doing and hope for the best. Care in choosing a *shidduch* isn't a modern invention. *Chazal* speak about looking into the person, the family, and whether a match is suitable. They speak about approaching marriage with patience and judgment. Things that aren't considered beforehand can become *shalom bayis* difficulties afterward.

Sometimes people say that the whole problem today is that everyone is too picky. What do you mean? Someone suggests a boy, he is approximately the right age, he learns in a good *yeshivah*, the family is fine, and you should simply say yes? People can't do that. They need to understand what they are considering. You can be responsible and careful, and still ask whether the things holding you back are reasonable.

I remember speaking to a *Litvishe rav* about a *shalom bayis* difficulty. I asked whether he thought the way *Chassidishe* parents arrange *shidduchim* was part of the problem, since the boy and girl hadn't known each other beforehand.

He told me that, from what he had seen with his own *talmidim*, he understood very well the value of parents making those decisions. A young *bochur* doesn't yet have the experience to imagine what life in twenty years might look like. Parents have more years behind them and can bring a different judgment. But that means the parents need to use that judgment responsibly.

Sometimes people say, “Years ago, they put people together, and it worked.” Did it work well, or did they manage to get through the years? Those aren't always the same thing.

And even if people once tolerated a certain arrangement, you can't assume that your child will tolerate it too. From what I see, people today are less prepared to remain in a situation in which they aren't satisfied. Whether that is right or wrong, you have to take the reality into account when you look for a *shidduch*.

The other family has a choice too

There are many areas in life in which you can make a decision and go ahead. You decide where to work, where to learn, where to *daven*, or whether a particular arrangement is enough for you. With a *shidduch*, you need other people. You need a *shadchan*, another family, another person who wants what you are offering.

“But I know what kind of family is suitable for us.” Perhaps. Does that family think so too?

Some people have difficulty hearing that question. With their family background, their standing, their child's strengths, surely the other family should be interested. But if they aren't, waiting for them to recognize it doesn't necessarily help you.

Sometimes a parent is very impressed with one child and discovers that other people aren't particularly taken up with him. Another child, about whom the parent is less confident, receives many good suggestions. We aren't always the best judges of how other people see our children.

It's like a shopkeeper who has decided that his merchandise is excellent. Of course, people aren't merchandise. The comparison is about needing someone else to want what you think is so suitable. A customer wants something else, and the shopkeeper keeps explaining why this is what he should buy. Perhaps the shopkeeper is right. But he still needs a customer.

I once suggested that a parent make a few inquiries about his own child without identifying himself as the father. He was shocked by what he heard. People described things they wouldn't have said to his face, and it changed his understanding of how others saw his child.

When you hear that kind of feedback, don't immediately become offended or start arguing with everyone who said something you don't like. That happens often. You wanted to understand what people are hearing and thinking; now you have an opportunity to find out. Not every description is accurate, but don't fight the information simply because it differs from your own picture. It may help you understand why the search is going the way it is.

There is the old joke about a wife who calls her husband while he is driving. She heard on the radio that someone is driving the wrong way on the highway, and she wants him to be careful. “One person?” he says. “They're all driving the wrong way!”

Sometimes a person has to stop and notice what is happening around him. “This is the kind of *shidduch* I want. This is what I think is right. This is how I would arrange things.” Fine. But what is actually happening? What is being suggested? Who is interested? What are you learning from the way the search is going?

I don't mean that other people determine your value. I mean that you can't make a *shidduch* entirely on your own.

Don't take every answer personally

An *ehrlicher Yid* once told me something that had helped him throughout his life. Much of what people say to you has more to do with them than with you.

Someone gives you a compliment. It feels good. Perhaps he really appreciated what you did. Perhaps he is also a person who notices good and likes making others feel good. Perhaps he wants something from you.

And the other way around. Someone criticizes you, speaks sharply, or becomes upset. Perhaps it has to do with something you did. But perhaps he hasn't eaten breakfast, his *parnassah* is difficult, things aren't going well at home, or he has some other personal issue or grievance.

That *Yid* told me that understanding this had helped him not become too taken up with praise, and not become overwhelmed by criticism or even threats about what people would say.

It is relevant to *shidduchim* too. A family says no. You hear suggestions that you don't think are appropriate. It doesn't necessarily mean something is wrong with you or your child. Other people have their own ways of looking at things, their own preferences, and their own considerations.

Hashem knows who you are. You don't have to let every suggestion tell you what you are worth. But those are still the people with whom you are trying to make a *shidduch*. You can't disregard their decisions merely because their reasons seem foolish to you.

Even if you have become more reasonable

Sometimes a person works hard to become clearer about his priorities. He recognizes that he can't have everything, and he becomes prepared to overlook things he would previously have rejected. Then the other family says no over something that seems completely unreasonable.

“Because of something in my father-in-law's history? Because my brother has a child who is struggling? Because of where I live or where I *daven*? These people don't understand anything.”

Could be you have a point. You wish they would hear the same things you heard and reconsider what matters. But your becoming more reasonable doesn't make everyone else become more reasonable too. You still have to deal with the people who are there, with their preferences and their decisions.

This isn't meant to discourage you or make you feel inferior. It is part of understanding what you can do and what doesn't depend on you.

When the same thing keeps happening

If you find that you are turning down one suggestion after another, or that the families you want keep turning you down, it is worth discussing what is happening with someone who can guide you.

Perhaps you are looking for something that doesn't exist. Perhaps it exists, but the families you want are looking for something different. Perhaps there is something about your approach that needs to be understood. It doesn't mean that you are bad or that your child is lacking. But the pattern is information.

I have respect for people who can acknowledge where they stand even when it isn't comfortable. It allows them to look for what is actually good for their child, instead of waiting for something that isn't coming.

I was involved in trying to help with a *shidduch* where the girl was already twenty-six. It seemed to be a very suitable suggestion, but the father was getting caught up in details of dress, how someone *davened*, and something about the older generation of the family.

I asked one of the *shadchanim* whether he understood why these things were still holding it up. He answered that someone who didn't get caught on those things might not have reached that point.

I want to be careful with that. It does not mean that whenever a person is older and unmarried, the parents must have approached things wrongly. Certainly not. But in that situation, the parent still needed to look at what was keeping him from considering a good *shidduch*. Sometimes you need someone else's perspective to recognize what has become difficult to see yourself.

Guidance may need to be asked again

A parent may have received clear guidance when their child first entered *shidduchim*. Years later, the parent is still following exactly the same approach without asking whether the circumstances change anything.

I've spoken to people who received guidance at eighteen or nineteen and were still relying on it at twenty-six without asking again. Sometimes the guidance remains the same. Sometimes it doesn't.

We discussed that a *minhag* or *mesorah* may be something a person should remain firm about, even when it makes finding a *shidduch* more difficult. That doesn't mean that every earlier instruction necessarily applies in exactly the same way under every later circumstance.

If the question isn't a clear *halachah*, age, other difficulties, and the actual possibilities may affect the guidance. Those distinctions need a *rav* who understands the situation. There is also a difference between having several suitable possibilities and having very few. You need to explain what is actually on the table when you ask.

Time passes gradually

Someone once compared looking for a *shidduch* to looking for an *esrog*. Everyone would like a beautiful *esrog*. The right place of origin, clean, a beautiful shape, all the things he appreciates. Some people buy early. Others keep looking until *Erev Sukkos*.

But when *Sukkos* comes, people understand that they need an *esrog*. You don't usually see someone arrive in *shul* with only a *lulav* and explain, “I couldn't find the *esrog* I wanted. This one wasn't shaped properly, that one wasn't from the right place, and the other had a mark.”

With *shidduchim*, there is no *Erev Sukkos*—no single day when everyone knows the search must end. “He's only eighteen. Don't rush me.” Then another half year passes. Something was suggested, something else wasn't clear, and they are waiting to see.

“Nineteen? He's still young. He's learning well.” Another year passes. Now there is a family they want very much, but that family said no. They sent someone to speak to them. Perhaps another *shadchan* will be able to accomplish something.

When *Hashem* gives someone a baby, the responsibilities and expenses also come gradually. At first there are diapers and feeding. Later come other expenses, tuition, clothing, camp. Imagine if every expense of raising a child arrived on the first day. Who would feel prepared?

The gradual way things develop is a great kindness. But with a *shidduch* search, it can also make it hard to notice how much time has passed. Every day, the child is only one day older.

“Today I should accept what I didn't want yesterday?” And later, “At twenty-four I should consider what I didn't want at twenty? I waited all this time for that?”

There is a story about a man who kept turning down *shidduchim* because nothing was good enough for him. Finally, a *shadchan* told him plainly that he was being unreasonable and needed to work on his *anavah*. The man took it seriously. After some time, he came back to thank the *shadchan*. He had worked on himself, he said, and he was a different person.

The *shadchan* suggested a *shidduch*. The man looked at him in surprise. “You suggested that to me before I worked on my *anavah*. Now that I worked on it, you're still suggesting the same thing? It wasn't good enough for me then!”

It's a cute story, but you see something like that in the way people approach *shidduchim*. They have turned down many suggestions and waited longer, and somehow they expect that now something better should be coming.

But having waited doesn't mean that the suggestions will become better. Sometimes, as time goes on, you need to lower your expectations rather than raise them. You need to consider the circumstances you have now, not what you feel should be coming to you after everything you turned down.

Waiting alone doesn't make what you want more available. I recently heard about someone who went back to the *shadchanim* about suggestions made a year earlier. By then, several were no longer relevant. What had been available when he wasn't interested wasn't necessarily there when he was ready to reconsider.

There isn't a single deadline I can give everyone. But you can discuss with someone, from the beginning, when you should stop and look again at what is being suggested and how you are approaching it. Otherwise, it is very easy to keep waiting without ever deciding what you are waiting for.

Work with what is there

The *Chovos Halevavos* writes in his introduction that if he had waited until his *sefer* was perfect, it would never have been completed. So many things never come about because a person is waiting until everything is exactly right.

That is something to understand in *shidduchim* too. You have the child you have. You have the suggestions being offered. You need to look for something practical and suitable among actual possibilities.

There is a joke about a man in *Yerushalayim* claiming to be *Mashiach*. Someone challenged him: after everything the Jewish people had been through, all the suffering and generations of waiting, could it really have been for him? He simply replied, “*Zeh mah sheyesh.* This is what's here.”

Sometimes a person's argument about a *shidduch* comes down to, “After everything, this is what is being suggested to me?” You can be upset that people haven't understood you. You can explain why you expected something else. But you still need to deal with what is being offered and find what is good for your child.

Of course we believe that everything is *bashert*. We don't understand how all of that works together with our choices. But we still have our *hishtadlus* to do, and part of it is being willing to look at the situation as it is.

Chapter 6

Finding out what you need to know

Once you know what you are looking for, you can begin finding out whether the person being suggested has those qualities. But asking questions and getting information aren't always the same thing. “We asked three people. Everyone said he's a fine boy.” Very good. What did you find out about him?

Sometimes the family, the money, the status, everything around the *shidduch* already appeals to you. Now you want to hear that the boy is good too. You make the calls, people say nice things, and you feel that you have checked. But you need to notice what you are actually hearing, what the person means by it, and whether you are beginning to understand the boy or girl being suggested.

Ask someone you know

Whenever possible, ask someone you know and trust who knows the person being suggested. You know how he speaks. He knows you and understands that you are relying on what he tells you. He will meet you again after this telephone call. That adds a sense of responsibility to the conversation.

Of course, you won't always know someone who knows the boy or girl. But perhaps someone close to you knows a person whom they trust. Ask whether they can make the call. That person may be more comfortable speaking openly with someone they know, and your contact may have a better understanding of how to interpret the answer.

Calling a number from a résumé can provide additional information. But a pleasant conversation with someone you don't know isn't enough to rely on by itself. “A wonderful boy. He gets up before daybreak.” Perhaps he does. But how much do you know about the person telling you, how well he knows the boy, and what his words mean?

I've seen people seriously misled by information given this way. Sometimes the person thinks he is doing something kind by making the boy or girl sound wonderful. Sometimes he feels loyal to the person being discussed and gives little thought to the family relying on his words. And

sometimes people simply say things that aren't true. They speak confidently about things they don't know, deny difficulties, or describe someone in a way that bears little resemblance to the person.

This isn't only a question of interpreting compliments. You need to consider whether the person is giving you accurate information at all. Don't assume that because someone answers warmly and confidently, he understands the responsibility of what he is saying. Look for a connection through which you can get information you have good reason to trust.

Someone told me that when he needs information from a person he doesn't know, he drives down and sits with him face to face. He feels that he hears much more that way than he would in a telephone call to a stranger. You are trying to find a way to hear something reliable, from someone who takes seriously the fact that you will be making a decision based on what he tells you.

Far away can look more perfect

Sometimes a parent can't find anything suitable among the people he knows. He knows the families in his *shul*. He knows his nieces and nephews. Nobody is perfect. Then he hears about someone far away, where he doesn't know the people, and there he finds everything he wanted.

It could be a wonderful suggestion. But notice that the people you know have shortcomings because you know them. The person you don't know sounds perfect because you are relying on what you were told. Don't confuse not knowing the shortcomings with knowing that there aren't any.

The opposite can happen too. Someone suggests a twenty-year-old boy, and you remember him from *shul* before the family moved away six years ago. “I know him. He didn't make a good impression.” He was fourteen. What do you know about him now?

And even if you saw him recently and weren't impressed, what does that mean? He didn't have the presence you expected? He wasn't as tall as you would have liked? Does that tell you whether he could be a good husband to your daughter? You need to understand what your impression is based on and how much it tells you about the question you are trying to answer.

Hear the answer you were given

I have been called for information many times. Sometimes a person wants to speak carefully. He doesn't want to say something he shouldn't say or interfere with a *shidduch* unnecessarily. So he answers with a qualification.

“Do you think he'll learn in *kollel* for six years?” “I don't have a reason to think otherwise, but I don't know him closely enough.” And the caller hangs up saying, “He told me the boy will learn for six years.” That isn't what he told you. He told you that he doesn't know him closely enough.

Very often people hear what they want to hear. Someone may be hinting quite clearly that there is something he can't confirm, and the person calling takes away only the part he wanted.

There is a story about a *rosh yeshivah* who was asked about a *bochur* who had caused difficulties. He answered that they had just discussed him at a meeting in *yeshivah*: “There isn't another *bochur* like him in the *yeshivah*.” The people asking were very impressed.

You have to know what you heard. A beautiful expression doesn't necessarily mean what you have decided it means.

Understand what the person is describing

You also need to understand where the information is coming from. A principal may not be particularly impressed with a girl. That deserves attention. But what isn't she impressed with? Her academic ability? A certain kind of seriousness? Something in her conduct? You need to know what is being described before deciding what it means for the *shidduch*.

Perhaps the principal is looking at something that isn't so important to you. Perhaps she is telling you something that matters very much. The fact that she isn't impressed doesn't, by itself, tell you which it is.

The same can happen with a relative. An uncle may dislike a particular choice or family connection, without having something negative to say about the boy himself. You shouldn't disregard the reaction, but you need to put it into its proper context.

And then there is your part in hearing it. If you already like the *shidduch* very much, you may find a way to explain away what should have concerned you. If you are nervous or disappointed, you may hear a much stronger criticism than the person intended.

Sometimes you need someone to help you understand what you heard, without getting carried away with either enthusiasm or skepticism. You are trying to understand the information, not only your own feeling when you hear it.

Ask about the thing you need to know

“Is he a fine boy?” What do you expect the person to answer? Most people want to say something good. A general question can leave you with a general answer that doesn't tell you very much.

Explain what you are trying to understand. “This is something important to us. Have you seen him in a situation like this? What did he do?” “Can one rely on him in this area? How do you know?” You can sometimes learn much more by asking about a situation than by asking for another good description.

And when something is truly a condition on which you would accept or refuse a *shidduch*, don't leave it to an assumption. Suppose a father feels very strongly that his son-in-law must remain in *kollel* for six years. He wouldn't consider a *shidduch* otherwise.

“Will the boy learn for six years?” “Of course. His brothers are in *kollel*. His uncles are in *kollel*. His grandfather is a *rosh kollel*.”

Then the boy marries, and after a year and a half he leaves *kollel*. Now there is a whole difficulty in the family. “I would never have done the *shidduch*. There is no such thing in our family.”

Did you ask the boy what he intended? “I had to ask him?” You could have asked. Perhaps he would have told you. I'm not deciding here whether six years should have been your condition. I'm asking why, if it mattered that much, you relied on what the relatives were doing instead of finding out about him.

The same applies to a particular practice in *Yiddishkeit*—eating only *yoshon*, not carrying with the *eruv*, not going to the *Kosel*, going to the *mikvah* daily, or not going outside without a jacket. If something would make you turn down a *shidduch*, find out what the person himself does. Don't rely on the block, the community, or a relative who is known for that particular standard.

The same applies when asking about a girl. Does she intend to cover her *sheitel* after marriage? Does she *daven* daily? Whatever the particular point is, don't assume you know her practice or intentions because you know the family.

“Her mother does that. Everyone in their community does that.” Perhaps. But did you ask about her?

I've seen terrible disappointment over something that people say they would never have accepted, when beforehand they relied on an assumption. Of course you can still be surprised. Someone may tell you that he asked when he didn't ask. You can't control everything. But at least don't leave the things that matter most to an assumption you could have checked.

I know a father who wanted sons-in-law who got up early. Before each of his first three daughters married, he checked carefully with the boys' teachers and the people responsible for them in *yeshivah*. Were they getting up in the morning? He made sure to find out. After marriage, all three were getting up late.

What happened? I don't know what changed with each one. But there is something to understand about the information he was collecting. Getting up early in *yeshivah* tells you something. There are boys who don't get up even there. But it doesn't tell you everything about how a person manages when nobody is taking attendance, when he doesn't have to be somewhere, or when the usual schedule isn't there.

If getting up early matters that much to you, ask about that too. What happens during *bein hazmanim*? How does he manage his mornings when he is on his own? You want to understand

whether you are hearing about a habit he maintains himself or something he does within a particular arrangement.

And even after asking the right questions, remember that things can change. A person may genuinely have been getting up early and later begin getting up late. That doesn't necessarily mean that the information was false. Find out what you reasonably can, but don't turn accurate information about today into a guarantee about the rest of someone's life.

Make it easier to answer honestly

People generally want to give good information. If you ask, “Is he punctual?” they may quickly answer, “Of course. He's very punctual.” Sometimes the way you ask makes the person feel that anything less than that answer will ruin the *shidduch*. He becomes uncomfortable saying what he knows.

You can ask in a way that shows you understand ordinary human shortcomings. You aren't looking to turn every small difficulty into something terrible. You are trying to understand the person.

If you yourself aren't always so punctual or organized, you can say that. Sometimes the person feels more comfortable being open when he realizes that you aren't going to become alarmed over every detail.

That doesn't mean pretending something is unimportant to you when it is important, or saying something about yourself that isn't true. But the easier you make it for someone to be honest with you, the more likely you are to hear what he actually knows, rather than only what he feels comfortable saying.

Sometimes you have heard something that seems different from the answer you were given. “You say he's punctual. Someone told me he struggles with time management. Would you understand why someone would say that?”

One person answers, “Oh, you heard that already? He doesn't mean to be late. He stays up very late at night, so…” Another answers, “Late? You can ask anyone. He's the first person in the *beis medrash*.” You are hearing something more than the first easy “Yes, he's punctual.”

But don't say that someone told you something if nobody did. Being untruthful isn't the way to make your information more reliable. If you are considering a way of asking that raises a question about what you may say, ask your *rav*. The point is to help someone speak openly and to understand his answer, not to make him uncomfortable or catch him out.

What does the description mean?

Most people will tell you nice things. That's understandable. But even a positive description needs to be understood. “He talks to everyone. He's comfortable with anybody.” Does that mean that he is pleasant, confident, and knows how to make people comfortable? Or does he sometimes speak when it isn't appropriate and have difficulty recognizing when to stop?

“She is quiet and reserved.” That could describe someone refined who doesn't feel a need to say everything. It could also describe someone who finds ordinary conversation very difficult. “She is always helping.” Wonderful. But does she notice what people need and help them, or does she take over and make sure everything happens her way?

You can't settle those questions from the description alone. Ask what the person means. How does it look in practice? Can they describe a situation? You want to understand the person, not only collect words that sound good.

And remember that what you hear also tells you something about the person giving the information. Some people speak generously about everyone. Others are very critical and find something unpleasant to say about almost anybody. I've seen situations where the harsh description said more about the speaker than about the person being discussed. That doesn't mean disregarding negative information. It means understanding where it comes from and finding out what is actually being described.

There is something else worth noticing: what comes to people's minds before you begin asking specific questions?

You ask about a girl, and everyone begins by describing how deep, intelligent, and thoughtful she is. Later, when you ask about her character, they say that she is also very nice. That isn't necessarily the same picture as someone whose warmth and good nature are the first things everyone mentions.

Or you ask about a boy, and the first thing people tell you is that he knows how to get things done. He arranges things, takes responsibility, and makes things happen. When you ask about his learning, they tell you that he is diligent and takes it seriously. That may all be true. But notice what stood out to them without being asked.

I'm not saying that one description is good and the other is bad. That depends on what you are looking for and what your child needs. But don't overlook the difference between a quality that people immediately associate with someone and something they agree is there after you ask about it.

One person's order of answering doesn't establish very much. But after speaking to several people, you may notice that the same qualities keep coming first. That is part of the information too. Listen to what people emphasize, not only to whether they eventually gave a positive answer to every question.

Is a picture beginning to emerge?

There is more to checking than collecting one good sentence from each person. “One person told me he learns well. Someone else said he's on time. So we checked the learning and we checked the punctuality.” What do you know about the person? You may have an answer to each question without having much understanding of what he is like.

Sometimes a person feels good simply because he has asked. “I spoke to someone already. I asked two friends.” But the purpose isn't only to be able to say that you made the calls. Keep asking enough people to understand whether you are hearing something consistent. It doesn't cost money to make another phone call. Don't stop merely because you feel that you have already done your part.

Different people know different sides of a person. A *chavrusa*, a friend, someone who has seen him in other situations—each may describe something else. But are they describing the same person? As you hear from different angles, does the information fit together? You should begin to have a picture of what he is like, rather than a collection of unrelated compliments.

This doesn't mean that everyone has to use the same words or be equally impressed. Different people have different perspectives. But you want enough information to recognize a reasonably consistent person in what you are hearing. If that hasn't happened, “I already asked” isn't necessarily a reason to stop.

On the other hand, you also need to notice when you have enough. You have spoken to people who know the person. Their accounts fit together. You have good reason to consider them honest, accurate, and knowledgeable. Now what are you hoping the next call will tell you?

Sometimes you are hearing the same thing again and again, but you still want to hear it one more time. “Yes, he knows the boy well. Yes, he seems trustworthy. But how do I know for sure?” At some point, you aren't looking for another piece of information. You are looking for a certainty that another telephone call can't give you.

Some people find it very difficult to trust even reliable information. The doubt keeps returning, and they keep checking. If that is what is happening, more calls may keep you occupied without making the picture any clearer. It is worth discussing that with someone who can help you recognize whether there is still something reasonable to investigate or whether the checking itself is keeping you stuck.

You don't want to do too little research. But you can also overdo it. Find out responsibly, take real concerns seriously, and recognize that there is a degree of certainty you may never have.

What is behind the difference?

Sometimes you hear that the boy or girl wants to do something differently from the home in which they grew up. First there is the question of the practice itself. Is this something that matters for your child? What guidance have you received about it? But even if you are told that you can accept the difference, there may still be something to understand about the person.

There can be a difference between someone from a home where people have always done things a certain way, and someone who wants to move away from the way he was brought up. Why does he want that? Is there a good reason? Is this the whole matter, or is there more that you haven't understood? Does he intend to make other changes?

I'm not saying that every difference is a problem. Nor should you begin questioning every word and every movement suspiciously. Sometimes there is nothing troubling there at all. But don't automatically dismiss something without understanding it. Sometimes the right response is to look into it, rather than immediately say yes or immediately run away.

Research and the meeting

I heard an important point from Rabbi Dovid Levy. People sometimes rely on the information for what they should learn from the meeting, and rely on the meeting for what they should have found out beforehand. They have it the other way around.

They hear that the boy is pleasant, sociable, and *geshmak*, and assume that their daughter will feel comfortable with him. Then they expect to discover when meeting with him whether he has good *middos* and what kind of *yirei shamayim* he really is. But a short meeting, when everyone is on their best behavior, won't tell you or your daughter everything you needs to know about his character. That is what you need to investigate through people who know him.

And the information can't tell you whether these two people will feel comfortable together. Everyone may sincerely describe him as warm and easy to speak to. That doesn't mean your daughter will find it easy to speak to him. If the meeting felt tense or uncomfortable, “But everyone says he's so pleasant” doesn't answer what she experienced.

The information is meant to help you understand the person. The meeting is meant to help them see how they feel with each other. Both matter. It's sad how often people confuse the two and then rely on each one for something it can't tell them.

If you asked, give yourself time to hear the answer

I read an account by someone who helps people with their difficulties. A parent called him about a *shidduch*. He had heard information, wasn't sure what to do, and wanted guidance urgently before going ahead.

Before the person had a chance to answer, another message arrived. “It's all right. We're going ahead. We're closing the *shidduch*. The *lechaim* will be soon. *Mazel tov*.”

The person writing the account wondered how that happened. This parent had other married children and knew what it meant to help a child through a difficulty. When there was a problem, he was prepared to give time, money, and all his energy to find the right help. But beforehand,

when he himself had a question, he couldn't wait half a day because the *shadchan* was pressing?

I understood that account very well. I've seen the same thing many times. You heard something that concerned you. You felt it needed to be discussed. What changed so quickly? Did you find out something new, or did you become so taken up with the *shidduch* that the question stopped mattering?

I'm not talking about becoming obsessive, postponing everything, or waiting until you can be certain that nothing will ever go wrong. You can't have that certainty. But if something bothered you enough to seek guidance, give yourself the opportunity to hear the guidance and understand the answer before going ahead.

Chapter 7

What needs to be shared?

Someone wrote to me about a sibling who was in *shidduchim*. After reading my book about personalities, the writer understood the sibling's sensitivity much better. This was an intelligent, sociable person with very strong opinions, often expressed in a black-and-white way. At home there was a great deal of arguing, sometimes quite aggressively, although less with friends.

The writer felt that this sibling had received a great deal of criticism growing up and had gone through difficult teenage years. The arguing seemed so instinctive that the family had thought he or she actually enjoyed it. Now the writer understood that this wasn't necessarily so. The mother was reading the book too, and they felt that they finally understood something that had puzzled them for years.

But now there was another question. “It's helpful for us to understand someone with whom we already have a relationship. But what about a *shidduch*? How can we bring another person into this? Will the spouse have to spend a lifetime walking on eggshells? If we would have to mention a serious allergy or an emotional issue, why would this be different?”

It's a serious question. But before answering it, we need to understand what we are comparing.

A personality isn't a disorder

There are sensitive people, strong-minded people, fun-loving people, and all kinds of personalities. Each has strengths and things that can make relationships more difficult. If we

describe every part of a person's nature as a problem that has to be advertised before anyone can consider a *shidduch*, we won't get very far.

But understanding someone's personality doesn't settle every question about his conduct. In the letter, the writer described sensitivity, definite opinions, and aggressive arguing. You still need to understand what each of those means in this person's life, rather than put everything under one description.

There is a difference between a personality and a disorder. There is also a difference between ordinary characteristics that people who know the person can describe and a private issue that nobody outside the family could possibly discover.

Suppose a boy doesn't always come on time to *shiur*. He has *chavrusos*, *maggidei shiur*, friends. People know how he functions. Someone looking into the *shidduch* can ask about that. Would you begin every conversation by saying, “Before you consider my son, I need you to know that he often comes late”?

There are things that can be found out by asking the people who know him. Not beginning with a list of every shortcoming isn't the same as hiding a secret that the other family has no way of knowing. That is the distinction I'm making. It doesn't settle every question about a particular child's conduct.

When only you know

There are also real issues that are private. A diagnosis, treatment, a medical condition, or another serious difficulty may be known only to the person and the family. The other side can make all the calls and still have no way of finding it out.

“How was I supposed to know? You knew. You brought me into something without telling me.” You can understand that complaint.

If it is a real issue that needs to be shared, you need to share it. Exactly what has to be said, to whom, and at what stage needs proper *da'as Torah*.

It doesn't mean hanging a sign on the door with every diagnosis and every medication. Sometimes people present a difficulty in a way that makes it impossible for anyone to hear anything else about the child. But the fact that something is difficult to say doesn't answer whether it needs to be said.

I have seen discussions of which conditions have to be disclosed and which don't, with different opinions and different guidance. Somehow, people can be very good at finding the answer that works for them. You need guidance about what is right, not only an answer that makes it easier to proceed.

And never ask your child to keep something secret from a spouse or in-laws because you concealed information before the *shidduch* and are afraid of what will happen if it becomes known.

A label isn't the whole question

There is something else about this that I think people need to consider. Suppose a child has diabetes. People understand that there is something to discuss about disclosure. They expect the family to get guidance about when and how to say it. If it was concealed, the other side would be upset. But what happens when there is no familiar name for the difficulty?

At home, a boy has terrible outbursts. He gets into physical fights with siblings. The younger children have to be kept away from his room because he may become enraged. In *yeshivah* he is fine, and nobody outside the home knows.

Now people say, “What do you expect? That we should tell every *shadchan* all the things that happen at home? We would never be able to do a *shidduch*.”

But think about the comparison. A condition with a medical name can immediately be recognized as something that needs a question. A serious difficulty that may affect daily married life can be dismissed as a private family matter because it doesn't have that kind of name. We know that anger can cause tremendous suffering in a marriage. So why should the absence of a label make the question less important?

I'm not giving a *psak* about what you have to disclose in each case. I'm pointing out that you can't measure the significance of an issue only by whether it has a diagnosis, or whether people are accustomed to mentioning it. Nor should the discussion about ordinary personality traits be used to avoid asking about serious conduct that is hidden from everyone outside the home.

How are you describing the person?

Sometimes you can explain a characteristic clearly without putting the person in a terrible light. “He's strong-minded.” Is that a bad thing? Some people appreciate it. “She's an independent thinker.” Some people want someone who goes along with everyone. Others appreciate someone who thinks for herself.

A characteristic can have strengths and difficulties. You don't have to describe only the difficult side, as though the person has nothing else to offer. But you also shouldn't describe it so beautifully that nobody understands what you mean.

Suppose the family expects a son-in-law or daughter-in-law who will simply go along with everything. Your child isn't that person. “He's independent. He has strong opinions. If you appreciate that, wonderful. But if you expect to squash him and make him go along with

everything, that isn't going to happen.” Sometimes saying something clearly can prevent a misunderstanding that would make life harder for everyone afterward.

I know a father who specifically wanted strong-minded daughters-in-law. He wanted girls from strong homes, with definite religious convictions, and that was what he looked for. It came with challenges. I wondered whether some of those choices had been a mistake. But even years later, I don't think he felt that way. He knew what he had wanted, and he appreciated what he had found.

It had advantages and disadvantages. My point is that a description that frightens one family may be something another family understands and values.

What if the difficulty hasn't gone away?

Sometimes there is a real problem, and the child has already tried to get help. It hasn't disappeared. The family is waiting for the right person to fix it, hoping that afterward they can begin *shidduchim*.

Sometimes the guidance is to be open about where the child is now. “This is the difficulty. This is how it affects him. This is what he is doing to work on it. This is where things stand.”

I've seen *shidduchim* proceed with that kind of openness, with both sides knowing what was being discussed and being comfortable with it. That doesn't mean every problem can be managed in this way. It means that pretending there is no problem and waiting until it is completely gone aren't always the only possibilities. You need guidance about the actual situation.

Someone told me about a man looking for work who was very clear with the prospective employer. “I'm a good worker. I deliver, and you'll be pleased with the work. But I have a problem managing money. Don't give me a credit card. Pay the suppliers directly. Don't give me more money than you are prepared to pay me.”

He got the job. The employer knew what he was getting. The times he forgot the arrangement and handed over money, there were misunderstandings. But with the difficulty understood, they had a way to work together.

It isn't the same as a marriage. But it shows that being clear about a limitation doesn't always end a possibility. Sometimes it allows people to understand what they can work with.

Think about the other family too

We discussed the *bochur* whose outlook differed from his parents'. They were looking for a girl who fit their home. He was worried that she wouldn't fit the life he actually wanted. He didn't want to live a hidden life with his wife.

There are many things to discuss in that question. But I asked people to consider how they were hearing it. If this were your son, perhaps you would want me to tell him to stop being so clever, listen to his parents, and accept what they are finding for him.

Now imagine that this is the boy being suggested for your daughter. He's from a fine home. Everyone is saying fine things about him. But privately, he is asking whether he should say where he really stands or just go along and deal with the differences afterward.

Would you want him to remain quiet then? You wouldn't want your daughter brought into a life she hadn't agreed to. That has to be part of how you think about the other person's child too.

Mean what you promise

There is a difference between making a commitment sincerely and later finding that circumstances have changed, and promising something you never really intended to do. Life doesn't always go as planned. You may have expected to manage something and then discovered that you couldn't. That is one question. Saying yes simply to get the *shidduch* completed is another.

I've seen people agree to arrangements that they weren't seriously considering following through with. “We'll agree now. After they're married, we'll work it out.” Perhaps the discussion is about where the couple will live. You commit to a particular place while assuming that afterward it will be easy to change the arrangement. But the other family is making a decision based on what you told them. You can't give your word while privately planning how to get out of it.

The same applies when you speak for your child. Does he actually intend to do what you are promising? Has your daughter agreed to the arrangement you are presenting as settled? Don't promise on their behalf simply because you hope that once the *shidduch* is made, they will have no choice or everyone will somehow come around.

If something is uncertain, say that it is uncertain. If it is a possibility you are willing to consider, don't present it as a commitment. And if you cannot give the assurance the other family wants, you may have to say so, even if that makes it harder to proceed.

And aside from the dishonesty, don't assume that this will work in your favor. You may get the other family to agree to the *shidduch*, but afterward they discover that you aren't keeping your word. Now there is hurt, resentment, and a question about whether they can trust you. Your child may be the one left dealing with it.

You thought that once the *shidduch* was completed, it would be easy to change the arrangement. But the fact that everyone is now connected can make the disappointment much harder to deal with. What looked like a way to make things work can become a source of aggravation between the families and within the marriage. Don't assume that getting someone to agree means you have accomplished something good for your child.

We discussed that people change and that you cannot guarantee the whole future. That doesn't excuse being dishonest about your intentions now. You aren't expected to know everything that will happen. You are expected to mean what you say when someone else is relying on it.

Can your child be open with you?

Before you can decide what to share with the other side, you need to understand your own child. Do you know where he stands? Can he tell you?

Sometimes a child has learned that being open only brings a difficult reaction. So he says what the parents want to hear, and they continue looking for a *shidduch* on that basis. You may not agree with what your child tells you. You may need guidance about how to respond. But if you don't know the truth, how will you know what kind of *shidduch* you are making?

In discussing a child who struggles with honesty, we considered whether the parents' response makes it harder for the child to tell the truth. That question matters here too. If your child expects a harsh reaction, he may avoid telling you something you need to understand. That doesn't make an untruth right. It gives you something to consider in your own approach.

The *bochur* who wrote to me needed to find a respectful way to explain himself to his parents. Sometimes another person can help with that conversation. He didn't need to be hurtful. But continuing with nobody understanding what he meant wasn't a good answer either.

You want to know the child for whom you are making the *shidduch*. Then, with proper guidance, you need to make sure that the other family understands what matters too. Don't proceed on a picture that you know doesn't match the person who is going to marry.

Chapter 8

Following through on a *shidduch*

I've heard from people who have been married ten years, twenty years, even thirty years, and before discussing the difficulty they have now, they begin with the same thing. “I never wanted to marry her.” “I told them I didn't want this boy.”

Sometimes the *lechaim* was already prepared. Sometimes the parents had brought the child from *Eretz Yisrael*, and everyone expected the *shidduch* to be completed. Sometimes the child said something, and the answer was that it was good and he would come to appreciate it.

I'm not saying that everyone who has a *shalom bayis* difficulty begins that way. But I've heard it enough times to know how much hurt people can carry over not having felt that they had a choice. Parents have an important part in a *shidduch*. A young boy or girl needs help understanding what to look for and what they are seeing. But you need to work with the child, responsibly and gently.

What is the meeting for?

We discussed the difference between the information and the meeting. Information helps you understand things that you won't discover by sitting together for a short time. The meeting gives the boy and girl an opportunity to see how they feel with each other. Is there something pleasant? Are they comfortable? Can they speak? Does the person appeal to them?

We also discussed understanding what kind of home your child wants. Now you are considering a particular suggestion. What is he telling you about this person? Is something bothering him? Don't assume that because the suggestion fits what you were looking for, there is nothing more to hear from him.

Sometimes they are young and don't know what to make of the experience. They may need help understanding what they are meant to be considering. But they aren't going to determine in those few minutes whether he is a great *talmid chacham* or whether she has all the good qualities you heard about. That is part of what you were supposed to look into beforehand. Nor should the information be used to dismiss what happened at the meeting.

Someone told me, many years into his marriage, that from the first meeting he felt he couldn't speak to the girl. He spoke, she didn't answer, and he felt intimidated. He told his father afterward. “It's normal,” his father said.

Perhaps a person is nervous at a first meeting. But you need to understand what your child is telling you, rather than simply decide that it doesn't matter.

Chazal took seriously that a person should see the one he is marrying and not enter a marriage in which he cannot feel affection. They speak about *va'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocha*. It isn't only a question of whether the couple will fight or whether the marriage will remain intact. They should be able to live together with love. That is part of what you are trying to understand.

If the child is comfortable

Sometimes a boy or girl is genuinely comfortable relying on the parents. “If Tatty and Mommy say it's good, I'm happy with it.” Very good. If that is truly how the child feels, you don't need to make him uncertain. You don't have to keep insisting that he develop an opinion he doesn't have.

The same applies after a meeting. If the information is good, the child is comfortable, and he feels that he has what he needs, there isn't necessarily a reason to insist on another six meetings.

But there is a difference between that kind of trust and a child who is bothered by something and feels unable to say it. If you suspect that he isn't comfortable, don't avoid asking because the *shidduch* suits you. And if he has told you something, don't treat it as though he said nothing.

The last push

Some children need encouragement to move forward. You know that from other areas of life. Going into *yeshivah*, going to a dormitory, beginning something new—sometimes a child would remain stuck if nobody helped him.

That can be true in *shidduchim* too. A child may be reserved, insecure, indecisive, or afraid of making a lifelong commitment. Not every hesitation means that something about the *shidduch* is wrong.

Sometimes you do need to be a little pushy. Of course, the *shidduch* has to make sense, and you have to understand what is bothering the child. You aren't deciding that his feelings don't count and that he will do whatever you want. But there is a place for encouraging him, helping him think it through, and prodding him to move forward when fear is holding him back.

Still, you need to know where to stop. Even if you felt it was important to help him through the first ninety percent, leave the last ten percent for him. Let him come back with his own answer. That last part may be the most important part of how he will feel about the decision afterward.

“We had the *bashow*, and the *lechaim* was already set up in the next room.” I've heard that complaint so many times. “Nobody really asked me. I said I didn't know.” Everything looked good, everyone was excited, the *shadchan* was pressing, and people were waiting for an answer. But the child wasn't quite ready.

The parents think, “We're already here. All he needs is one more push. If I tell him to do it, he'll do it.” Perhaps he will. But years later, he may still say, “I wasn't ready. I knew they were waiting. I didn't feel that I had a choice.” Especially with a sensitive child, that feeling can remain even when the *shidduch* itself seemed good.

Sometimes all he needs is to sleep on it. Sometimes he needs to speak to his *maggid shiur* or someone he trusts. Let him think, let him discuss it, and wait until he comes back with the answer. Giving him that opportunity can make a difference long after everyone has forgotten whether the *lechaim* took place that night or the next day.

I was involved in a *shidduch* where the *bochur* was very undecided. The parents wanted to go ahead immediately. I asked him to request at least twelve hours after the meeting before

completing the *shidduch*. It didn't take twelve hours. It took four. After four hours, he was comfortable and ready to proceed. But until then, the pressure was making it much harder for him.

It isn't a rule that everyone needs twelve hours or that four hours is enough. In that case, giving him room made the difference. I've heard the same guidance from *rabbanim* and *ehrliche Yidden*: give the child a little space to say yes.

You need to distinguish between helping a child become comfortable with something good and making him agree to something he doesn't want. Try to help him want what is good for him, and be gentle in the encouragement. Getting the yes isn't all you need to accomplish.

Sometimes the parents are looking at things with maturity and good judgment. They understand that this could be a very good *shidduch*, and that the family status or some other detail bothering the child isn't nearly as important as the person he would be marrying. They may be right. But their child isn't there yet. He feels ashamed or uncomfortable, and knowing that he shouldn't feel that way doesn't make the feeling disappear.

You can encourage him. You can ask someone he trusts to help him think it through. I've seen parents succeed in helping a child recognize what really matters and become genuinely comfortable with a suggestion he had initially resisted. He came to understand that he could have a good, pleasant life with this person, and that what people might say deserved much less attention than he had been giving it.

That is something worthwhile to accomplish. But the aim is for your child to understand and feel comfortable, not simply to stop objecting. If that hasn't happened, don't assume that pushing him to agree will bring the same result. Perhaps one day he will see it differently. But he is the one entering the marriage now, and the discomfort can remain with him for years. Being right about what should matter doesn't accomplish what you want if your child remains unhappy with the person he was persuaded to marry.

If you aren't sure what his hesitation means or how much encouragement is appropriate, get help understanding it. Parents also need guidance about how to guide. You may have helped him a great deal along the way. Now give him the opportunity to make the final decision himself.

What is really bothering you?

Sometimes people aren't clear about what they like or don't like in a suggestion. Something attracts them, something else bothers them, and they can't quite explain either one. That can happen. But don't become so accustomed to the confusion that you continue the whole search without understanding what is guiding you.

What is pulling you toward this person? What is turning you away? Is it something you learned about the boy or girl, something about the family, or a feeling you haven't understood yet? If the particular concern were resolved, would you feel differently about the suggestion?

Sometimes you can work that out yourself. Sometimes you need someone who can listen carefully and help you understand your response. Don't only look for agreement with your conclusion. Explain what you know, what you feel, and what remains unclear.

You don't need to describe everything in one sentence. Some situations are complicated. But after discussing them, you should have a clearer understanding of what you are considering. More explanation isn't always more clarity.

A no is also a decision

Making a *shidduch* is a serious decision. It is normal not to feel completely certain. People have difficulty deciding much smaller things. Here you are considering a partner for life.

Sometimes comparing two possibilities makes things clearer. You see what matters to you and which seems more suitable. Sometimes having two makes you more confused. But don't assume that because you aren't entirely sure about yes, no is automatically the safer answer.

“I don't feel one hundred percent comfortable yet.” I understand. People like to feel sure. But are you sure that the suggestion isn't good? Are you certain it couldn't work? Why does saying no sometimes feel so much easier, as though that decision carries no uncertainty of its own?

Perhaps no is right. Perhaps there is a concern that needs more information or guidance. But sometimes the suggestion looks suitable, you have done what you reasonably can, and you are still waiting for a feeling of certainty. You may never get that feeling. There is uncertainty in life, and there is a certain amount we have to be prepared to live with.

Especially as parents, you don't necessarily have to feel completely settled about every part of the choice. Your son or daughter is the one who will be married to this person. Of course you want to feel good about it, but the fact that something still feels unfamiliar or uncomfortable to you doesn't by itself mean that the match is unsuitable.

The boy and girl need to feel comfortable with the person they are considering. We discussed taking their reactions seriously and giving them room to decide. A parent's unsettled feeling isn't the same question. You need to understand whose uncertainty you are dealing with and what is behind it.

That is one reason *da'as Torah* matters so much. Someone who understands the situation can help you distinguish a concern that needs attention from the difficulty of making a decision without knowing the whole future. Turning something down because the feeling isn't entirely there isn't always the right answer either.

This applies to disagreements between parents too. “How can you say yes without me?” is a fair question. But “How can you say no without me?” also needs to be heard. One parent's hesitation shouldn't automatically settle a shared decision without discussion.

None of this is a reason to override a child's objection. It is a reason to consider no with the same seriousness as yes. Saying no can mean turning down something good. It carries responsibility too.

A question about *mesorah*

A *bochur* wrote that during a meeting, the girl told him she wanted a particular way of dressing that differed from the way both their mothers dressed. He explained why the family's practice mattered to him. She considered it over *Shabbos* and remained unwilling to agree, so the *shidduch* didn't proceed.

Now he wondered whether he had acted correctly. Perhaps he should have met her again. He also felt confused that after giving something up for *Yiddishkeit*, he still hadn't become a *chosson*.

There were details I didn't know, and this was a question for proper *Torah* guidance. An inherited practice can be important enough to stand on. But the circumstances matter, and a person needs help understanding how to apply what he believes.

I recalled a story I had read about a *bochur* who went to the *Pnei Menachem*. He was prepared to proceed with a *shidduch*, but the girl wanted another meeting. In his community, the practice was to meet only once before deciding, and he didn't want to give that up.

The next day, the *Rebbe* called him back with a thought. If he turned down this girl, he would eventually meet another girl. He would go through another meeting in any case. Perhaps, instead, he should meet this girl a second time.

The point isn't to make your own rule from the story. It is to understand that *da'as Torah* can distinguish things that looked entirely clear to you. And if, with proper guidance, a young person had a sound reason to decline a particular *shidduch*, he doesn't need to spend his life feeling guilty because it wasn't what he wanted.

The next thing that happens isn't the whole answer

Part of the *bochur's* confusion was that he had expected something to follow his decision. After giving up a *shidduch* for something he believed was important, perhaps he would immediately find the right one.

We don't know *Hashem's* calculations that way. Sometimes you see something beautiful in the way events come together, and it strengthens your *emunah*. Appreciate that. But don't assume that you now know exactly why things happened or how the next thing must happen.

Perhaps a good outcome has to do with a grandmother's prayers, with *tzedakah*, or with something you know nothing about. And when the outcome isn't what you hoped, it doesn't prove that your earlier decision was wrong.

People can become very troubled by trying to read every result as a judgment on what they did. “If it didn't work, perhaps my prayers weren't good enough. Perhaps I didn't give enough.” You don't know that.

Sometimes later you understand why something didn't proceed. Sometimes you don't. We believe it is *bashert* whether or not we eventually see an explanation that satisfies us.

Considering the suggestion in front of you

Chazal speak about *shema yekadmenu acher*, meaning that an opportunity may be taken by someone else if we do not act on it when it arises. We can't treat a suitable suggestion lightly on the assumption that if it is ours, it must remain available whenever we want it. Nor do we know that something we would prefer will be suggested later. You need to consider what is being offered now.

A reader told me about a *shidduch* suggested for a young sibling with someone who had a significant medical condition. The father felt that he needed to consider the actual suggestion on its merits, rather than reject it only because he imagined that something without that difficulty might come later. The reader reported that the couple were very happily married.

That doesn't decide what another family should do about a medical condition. It describes how that father approached that particular question. Each situation needs its own understanding and guidance.

You aren't deciding the whole future

Sometimes the more we investigate, the more we feel that everything depends on getting this decision exactly right. But what do you really know about the future? How healthy will they be? Will they have children? What *parnassah* will they have? What other difficulties may come their way? How long will they live?

You can do the research carefully and find a very suitable match. You still cannot arrange every part of their lives. That doesn't mean you should disregard what you do know and accept anything. It means you need to understand what your responsibility is.

Find out what you can. Get guidance. Work with your child. Make the decision responsibly, and *daven* that *Hashem* should help.

You can't wait until you know with certainty that this is the best life your child could possibly have. You don't have that certainty about your own life either. And after the decision, you still need to turn to *Hashem*: “I tried to do what I should. Please help them.”

Chapter 9

After you have made the *shidduch*

Very often, people make a *shidduch* feeling that they found something wonderful. The family, the information, all the good qualities they heard about. Then they begin noticing things they don't like. “I can't believe it. I thought that with this family…”

Part of it is simply that you are getting to know the person. You heard descriptions and met a few times. Now there is more contact, and eventually you see how the person manages ordinary life. Of course there will be things you didn't hear about or notice beforehand. That happens between husband and wife, and it happens when parents get to know a son-in-law or daughter-in-law.

But there is something else too. When you want a *shidduch* to work, you are looking for the good. You want to hear something encouraging. You are pleased when you notice a quality you appreciate, and you hope that what you are hearing will turn out to be true. There is something good in that. Someone who only looks for what is wrong can make it very difficult to find a *shidduch* at all.

At the same time, that hope can affect how you understand things. You give a favorable interpretation. Something isn't quite clear, but you expect that it will be fine. Perhaps there was something you could have noticed, but you didn't give it much attention because you were hoping it wasn't a difficulty.

Once the *shidduch* is made, you aren't looking at a possibility in quite the same way. Now this is the person joining your family. Some of that hopeful picture meets ordinary life, and things you passed over before can become more noticeable. That doesn't necessarily mean that someone misled you or that you made a mistake. You may simply be seeing more than you saw while you were hoping to make the *shidduch*.

Sometimes it happens the other way. You thought you were compromising, and afterward you discover that things are better than you expected. There are pleasant surprises too. But either way, be prepared for the person not to be exactly what you imagined.

The decision has changed things

Before making a *shidduch*, you are considering a suggestion. Something may be important enough to you that you decide not to proceed. It doesn't have to mean that there is something terribly wrong with the person.

But once the *shidduch* has been made, you aren't in the same place anymore. Something that might have been a reason to turn down the suggestion isn't necessarily a reason to break the *shidduch*, or even to begin speaking about breaking it.

There is such a thing as breaking a *shidduch* when the situation calls for it. But that takes something more serious and proper guidance. Once the couple is married, the commitment is greater still. And when there are children, that too has to be taken into account. These aren't all the same decision. You can't keep approaching the situation as though you were still deciding whether to make the first telephone call.

“If I had known this three weeks ago, I wouldn't have done it.” Perhaps. But you did the *shidduch*. That fact has to enter the way you think and speak now.

Unless there is a serious question that needs to be addressed, give the *shidduch* your support. Look for the good in what you have, and help the children feel good about it. Beginning with regret and constantly reconsidering the choice can itself make things very unhealthy.

Remember why you did it

I spoke to someone who had made a *shidduch* knowing that certain things weren't exactly what he wanted. He had considered his child, the possibilities available, and the things that mattered most. He felt that this was the right choice.

Yet only a week later, the same things were bothering him again. “But the family really does have this difficulty.” I asked, “Didn't you know that?” “Yes.” “So why did you do the *shidduch*?” “Because for my son, with the choices we had, I felt this was the best thing.”

Do you remember that you made that decision consciously? You knew it wasn't everything you wanted, and you decided that it was good for your child. The fact that it still bothers you doesn't mean you forgot something when you made the decision. It may mean that the thing you were prepared to accept isn't as comfortable to live with as it was to discuss. Remember what you took into account. Remember what you decided was more important.

Sometimes a parent says, “I never wanted this *shidduch*. My husband wanted it,” or, “My wife pushed for it, and I gave in.” Perhaps that is what happened. Perhaps there is something between the two of you that still needs to be discussed.

But now your child is married. The question of who wanted the *shidduch* and who gave in doesn't answer how you should deal with the young couple. Even if you still feel that your spouse made the wrong decision, you need to think about what is helpful for your child now.

When everything becomes proof

A mother wrote to me about her oldest daughter. Her husband was a wonderful, *ehrlicher ben Torah* who felt strongly about high spiritual standards. Their daughter was different in her approach and had told them what kind of husband she was looking for.

At first, the mother had been concerned that her husband would have difficulty looking past his own preferences. But he was able to do it. She was careful not to push a particular suggestion. She wanted him to be fully part of the decision.

Their daughter married a sincere, *ehrlicher* boy. In terms of his style of *frumkeit*, he wasn't what her father would personally have chosen. But the couple seemed very happy.

The difficulty began after the wedding. Her husband found fault with almost everything the son-in-law did. If he learned, it wasn't enough. If he spent time with his wife, he wasn't serious enough. If he *davened* with extra concentration, he was putting on a show. If he *davened* more quickly, he lacked depth. If the daughter called often, it meant that she wasn't happy. If she didn't call, that was somehow the son-in-law's fault too.

The mother had tried to look at it carefully. She didn't see a serious concern. Perhaps the boy wasn't quite as exceptional as some of the information had sounded, but she didn't see a basis for calling the whole *shidduch* a mistake. Her husband was respectful and pleasant to him. Still, their daughter had picked up on how he felt.

The mother wanted to know what her part should be. Listen to her husband and understand him? Defend the daughter and son-in-law? Try to explain why he was reacting this way?

People see the same thing differently

We all see people through our own feelings and attitudes. It isn't only a question of a son-in-law. Think about a well-known person. Some people see everything he does as wonderful, sincere, and *l'shem Shamayim*. Other people see the same actions very differently. To them, he is too extreme, unreasonable, or concerned with his own image.

I remember sitting on a bus as a boy and hearing two people discuss someone I held very highly. To me, this was an *adam gadol*, a *heilige Yid* who was accomplishing so much.

I had assumed that anyone who spoke negatively about him simply didn't know enough. Perhaps he had never seen him or been close to him. But the people I overheard did know

whom they were discussing. They had seen him and had a clear opinion. It was just very different from mine.

It surprised me. As you get older, you begin recognizing how differently people can see the same thing. You and your spouse may see someone differently. Your child may appreciate something you don't appreciate.

And it goes both ways. Sometimes the parents are less *farfrumt*, and it bothers them that their child or the person he married is more *farfrumt*. The same difficulty can happen in that direction too. Trying to force everyone to have the same feeling doesn't usually accomplish much.

You chose him for your daughter

In the mother's letter, the father had already understood that his daughter needed a different kind of boy from the one he would personally have preferred. He found her a nice, *ehrlicher*, sincere boy. He knew the boy wasn't as *farfrumt* in style as he would have liked, and he agreed because he understood that this was suitable for her.

Now he kept noticing that the boy wasn't as *farfrumt* as he would have liked.

But you knew that. You considered it. You made the *shidduch* anyway because you thought it was good for your daughter. You did something difficult. You were able to look beyond your own feeling and think about what she needed. Don't lose sight of that now because the difference still bothers you.

If you were choosing a son-in-law only for yourself, you might have chosen someone else. But you were choosing a husband for your daughter. You can acknowledge, “This isn't what I would have wanted for myself, but I believe that I did something good for her.”

That doesn't mean that every newly discovered issue should be dismissed. In this letter, the mother was describing an *ehrlicher* young man and a happy couple, without serious concerns. We are discussing that situation, where the parent's discomfort keeps becoming a reason to regret a decision he had made responsibly.

And remember that your child has married into another home. He will probably take something from that home—a *chumra*, a *kula*, or both. You looked into the family and understood that these were *ehrliche* people with their own standards. That didn't mean they would do everything exactly as you do. It shouldn't surprise you that something from their home becomes part of your child's home too.

Listen without agreeing that it was a mistake

Something may really bother your spouse. Telling him that he is biased doesn't necessarily make it bother him less.

People use the word “triggered” very freely. Sometimes it becomes an excuse for whatever they do afterward. “That's one of my triggers.” It may explain the reaction. It doesn't excuse everything that follows. But the feeling itself can still be real.

If you notice that your husband is bothered by something, you can listen. “I understand that this bothers you. Thank you for telling me.” You don't have to agree that the marriage was a mistake. You aren't agreeing that the couple has a problem that needs your involvement. You are understanding why something feels uncomfortable to him.

Some of what he notices may even be true. The son-in-law isn't perfect. Neither is your daughter, your husband, or you. You will often get farther by listening than by saying, “Why are you always negative? It's only because you see everything that way.”

When the person feels understood, it may become easier to discuss the reason you made the *shidduch*. “We wanted something good for our daughter. From what we can see, she is happy. That is what we were trying to accomplish.”

How is the couple doing?

There is a difference between asking how your daughter is doing and making her marriage into something you keep investigating. You can try to understand, in a healthy way, whether she is happy, without meddling or introducing concerns she hasn't raised.

If she is doing well, and you found her an *ehrlicher* husband with whom she can build a good home, that matters much more than whether every interaction gives you the feeling you wanted.

I'm not saying that being happy is the only consideration in a *shidduch*, or that nothing else matters. We are discussing a normal, *ehrlicher shidduch* that seems good for the child, while the parent would have preferred something different. You can want everyone to grow and become better. But that doesn't mean that the marriage would have been better if you had insisted on someone more to your own taste.

Let your child hear something good

The mother also has a part in helping her daughter feel comfortable. Let her hear that you are happy with her, happy with her marriage, and pleased with her husband. Even if she senses that her father feels differently, hearing something good from her mother can help.

You don't have to say, “Tatty doesn't appreciate your husband, but I do.” If she hasn't raised the subject, don't introduce it. You can give her encouragement without making her part of a disagreement between her parents.

And where there are good things people say about each other, those can also be given over. A daughter can hear something her father appreciates about her husband. A father can hear that his son-in-law respects him, learns from him, or looks up to him.

We are familiar with the approach of *Aharon HaKohen*, who brought people closer through the messages he gave over. Here too, look for the good things you can pass on to help people appreciate each other, instead of carrying the criticism from one to the other.

Don't keep making the decision again

Sometimes the doubts begin immediately after closing the *shidduch*. Then after the wedding there are more things to notice, more comparisons, and more reasons to wonder. “I thought…” “They told me…” “Perhaps we should have…”

If you did what you could responsibly, got the guidance you needed, and made the decision, you don't need to keep searching for the perfect person afterward.

I've heard from married children that the parents never really accepted the spouse from the beginning. Every visit carried that feeling that this wasn't what the parents had wanted. But you had your opportunity to look into the *shidduch*. You considered what was important. Perhaps you were even the ones who arranged it and felt it was good. Now accept the children and help them feel good about the home they are building.

You will still notice things. If you are always waiting for something else before you can be satisfied, there will always be something else to wait for.

And when another child enters *shidduchim*, get the guidance you need for that child. Don't turn it into a tug of war about what happened before. Keep trying to understand what is good for the child in front of you.

Introduction

Opening the conversation

“Why doesn't my son accept what I tell him? Why don't married children understand that parents also have something to say? When I was a *yungerman*, I discussed everything with my father.” And from the other side: “My parents still think I'm a little child. They keep watching me and getting involved. They don't understand that what they want doesn't work for me.”

I hear both very often. Sometimes the question is about money. Sometimes it is about visits, grandchildren, a family custom, or something a parent notices in the child's marriage. People are hurt. They feel misunderstood. They try to explain themselves, and the explanation creates another argument.

Someone once described the difficulty with teenagers this way: where you want them to be children, they're already grown up, and where you want them to be grown up, they're still children. You want them to be open, accept guidance, and let you into their lives, and suddenly they're independent. Then you expect them to manage something on their own, and they still need you very much.

Something similar can happen when children marry. People say that you aren't losing a child; you're gaining another one. But sometimes we take them in where we should be letting them go, and let them go where we should be taking them in. We want to direct their decisions and know everything happening in their home. But when they need time, encouragement, or practical help, we feel, “You're married already. You have a home of your own.”

It would be easier to go entirely in one direction. But sometimes we need to step back where we most want to remain involved, and be available where we had hoped they would manage without us. Learning where to do each takes thought. And when we misunderstand what is needed, it can affect the child's marriage, our relationship with the child, and sometimes our own marriage too.

Seeing this so often brought me to spend more time on the subject. I began writing a weekly column about parents and married children. Each week there was another question, another letter, another point worth understanding.

I spoke about these matters before I married off children myself. I was already speaking to parents and hearing what they were going through. After I married off a child, and then another, a few people teased me: “Nu, have you started changing your approach?”

Baruch Hashem, no. But I understand the subject differently now. When you marry off children and begin to realize what you want from them, you also begin to realize what your own parents would have wanted from you.

This book comes from that experience. I'm not setting out a philosophy of what every parent-child relationship should look like. I'm discussing what people encounter, what they may not understand, and what can help them deal with it.

I'm also not setting out to rule on questions of *halachah*. When I suggest that a parent approach something differently, I don't necessarily mean that *halachah* requires that change. When I suggest remaining quiet, I don't necessarily mean that saying something would be forbidden.

“But why should I have to do things differently?” You may not have to. But you want a good relationship with your child. You want your child to feel comfortable with you, and you want to enjoy the connection. What happens when you say something? Is it heard? Does it help? Or does it leave everyone more upset?

That is the practical question. An approach may have worked while a child lived at home and work differently now. Something that one child appreciates may bother another. We need to notice what is actually happening rather than assume that doing what seems right to us must bring the result we want.

Of course, this has to be in line with *Torah*. Honoring parents is one of the Ten Commandments, and marriage doesn't remove it. Questions about obligations, conflicting responsibilities, religious law, and family customs require appropriate *Torah* guidance. Experience doesn't take the place of a *rav*.

On *Pesach*, the parent-child connection is at the center of the *Seder*: a father teaching his son about the miracles of leaving Egypt. That doesn't only involve little children. Many people continue joining their parents' *Sedarim* when they already have grown children of their own.

Torah is passed from father to son, from one generation to the next. This connection carries our *mesorah*. It is something precious that we want to preserve. There is still much to understand about the people involved and how to communicate with them. Knowing what is required doesn't automatically tell you how to say it, when to say it, or what the other person will hear.

That is also why I wanted to address both parents and married children in one book. When I ask parents to reconsider their approach, I don't want them to hear that their children no longer owe them respect, appreciation, or an effort to remain connected. A parent's responsibility to be careful doesn't remove the child's responsibility.

And I don't want married children reading the advice to parents and thinking, “Then my parents shouldn't have said that, and I can answer however I like.” Your parents may need to give you more room. That doesn't justify disrespect or mean that you no longer need to consider their feelings. Each side has its own part, even when the other side isn't doing everything as it should.

It is sad how often cutting off parents is suggested, and how readily people act on that advice. From what I've seen, it is very rarely what is actually needed. There are serious situations that require individual guidance, and I don't want to dismiss them. But needing privacy, disagreeing with your parents, or being hurt by their words doesn't mean that the relationship should end. Even when things are very difficult, we need to make a real effort, with proper guidance, to find a way to remain respectful and connected.

Many readers are in the middle. They have married children, and they still have parents, *Baruch Hashem*. They may be reading about giving their children room while also being asked to make an effort with their own parents. “So I have to be careful on both sides?”

In some ways, yes. That can feel demanding. You may wish that at least in one direction, the other person would understand and make it easier for you. But if you want to do right, and not only establish that you are right, there is something to consider in both relationships.

Sometimes we can find ourselves wanting room from our own parents while becoming very involved in our married children's decisions. From each position, our reasons make sense to us. Seeing both sides together can help us notice that and think a little more carefully about what we are asking of others and what we are doing ourselves.

Sometimes people learn what a healthy relationship should look like, and it makes things worse at home. Until now, certain things bothered them. Now they have a whole explanation of how the other person is treating them wrongly.

A person hears a *shiur* and comes home thinking, “Now my wife will understand.” Or, “I hope my husband heard that.” What did you hear for yourself? What can you do with what you learned?

Of course, it's wonderful when you can discuss an idea together and both want to work on it. That's another reason to appreciate each other. But if the other person doesn't agree with the idea, what happens now? Has learning something new given you another thing to fight about?

Whatever you hear or read, look for what you can do to make the relationship better. I hope these discussions, drawn from the questions and experiences of families, will help people understand each other better and make it easier to remain close, with love, care, and respect.

Part 1 - Understanding the change

Chapter 1

Your child has a home of their own

Ask someone, “Why do you do that? Your father doesn't do it that way.” “Okay, my father does it differently. So what?” But ask him, “Why does your child do that when you do it differently?” Now it bothers him.

We expect our children to follow us, even after they marry. “They're my children. What happened here?” But when it comes to our own parents, we understand that we have a life of our own. A person sees his children as a continuation of himself much more than he sees himself as a continuation of his father.

The way you approach them

When we begin marrying off children, things change. Really, it doesn't begin at the wedding. The way we educate our children should already have been changing over the years. *Chanoch lana'ar al pi darko* means understanding the child you are teaching, including his nature, age, and stage.

But the changes happen so gradually that we don't always notice. Yesterday he was four. Today he is five, six, nine. Before you know it, he's a teenager, then a young adult. The way you approached him at one age isn't necessarily the way to approach him now.

Some people don't want to recognize the change. I hear parents speaking about children who are already grown, and they speak about them as though they were little children. “I told him, and he didn't listen. He knows what I want. I've told him so many times.” I ask, “How old is the son you're talking about?” “He's actually twenty-one.” But you're speaking about him as though he were nine.

“So he doesn't have to listen to me?” That is not what we're saying. His obligation to honor his parents has not disappeared. But the way you approach him cannot simply remain what it was when he was a little child.

We find this consideration in *Shulchan Aruch*, which prohibits hitting an adult son because the parent may provoke a forbidden response. That certainly doesn't mean the son is permitted to respond disrespectfully or hit back. His responsibility remains. But the parent still has to consider what his own conduct may bring about.

You might think that because he is older and more responsible for his actions, he should know better. And yet the parent has to be more careful about provoking him. The fact that he has an obligation doesn't mean that you can ignore whether he can handle the way you're dealing with him.

So this isn't a new idea that suddenly begins when a child gets married. You should already have been adjusting along the way. When a child goes away to *yeshivah* or seminary, becomes more independent, or has money of his own and needs you less, you need to notice where you stand with him.

Marriage is another significant stage. Your child has established a home, and the way you relate to that child needs another look. If you haven't been making those adjustments, now is the time to begin, before continuing in the old way causes more damage.

You had your time

Think of a teacher with a second-grade class. He has ten or twelve months with the children. There is a boy he cares about, and he tries a prize, a word, a compliment, a smile. He tries what he can, but by the end of the year, the difficulty is still there.

He tells the third-grade teacher, “This boy has this difficulty. Let's see what can be done.” A good teacher cares about the child. A month later, he asks how the boy is doing. But suppose it still isn't going well. Does he now arrange a meeting with the new teacher? With the principal? And what happens in fourth grade, in fifth grade? Where does it end?

Somewhere he has to recognize, “I had my time with him. I worked with him. I did what I could. Now someone else has him.”

I know the comparison isn't exact. Parents aren't teachers with a class for one year. They don't have someone else to whom they can simply hand over their responsibility. They care very deeply. It comes from love and good intentions.

But you had your eighteen, nineteen, twenty years. You tried to give your child a good example and teach him what he needed. You married him off, hoping he would continue in life. Somewhere you have to recognize that he is an adult, even when there are things you would still like to improve.

That doesn't mean, “I'm no longer here for you.” It means, “I've tried. I'm here for you, but you've grown. From here, you can go on your own.”

He also has a home

Most relationships have an arrangement that both people understand. Two neighbors are more or less on the same level. An employer and an employee understand that one is the employer and the other is the employee. A teacher and a young student also have a clear arrangement.

While children are young and dependent on their parents, that arrangement is clear too. I'm the father, you're the child. The parents take care of the children, and the children depend on them.

Now you are speaking to someone who also has a home. The father wants to have a say with a son who is already a father himself. He has experience raising children, making financial decisions, and dealing with all sorts of things.

And the son is thinking, “I also have children. I also understand what is involved in earning a living. I have my own guidance, my community. I don't live in your house.” That brings a difficulty into this relationship that isn't there in the same way with other relationships.

Sometimes we say, “I have to let him make mistakes.” But perhaps he doesn't think it's a mistake. “You're going on a trip? That much money? You could put the money away.” That's how you see it. He may feel that spending the money now is worthwhile.

Or he saved money and wants to give it to *tzedakah*. He believes in it. You think he should be doing something else with the money. You can have a difference of opinion about what is a mistake. Your child has grown up. He has a mind of his own. Somewhere you have to let him make that decision too.

Of course, sometimes he really does make a mistake. It isn't pleasant. But sometimes a person learns from it and grows from it. Even when you don't see anything good coming from the mistake, allowing someone to make his own decisions means that you won't always be able to prevent it.

You will always have something to say

For those who are still young enough to think that one day we outgrow this, you almost never get the feeling: “Okay, now he's completely educated. It took thirty-five years, but now I have nothing more to tell him. From today onward, if I have a question, perhaps I'll ask him.”

You yourself keep getting older. You gain more experience, perhaps more wisdom, and you see things differently. Besides, nobody reaches perfection. Your children won't reach perfection. Neither will you.

So you keep feeling, “How can I not say something? He isn't getting to his evening *shiur* on time. I see his learning partner there long before him. I should say nothing? He's only twenty-seven. If he gets used to this now, what will be when he's forty?” You will always have something to say.

A married man told me about this not long ago. He had his eleventh child. He had already given names after the grandparents and great-grandparents. Now he was considering a name after a particularly fine man for whom he had a feeling.

His father called. “What name are you thinking of giving?” He told him. “I don't think that's right. I think you should give the other name.”

“Tatty, I'm already up to my eleventh child. Sometimes a person can decide on his own. Do I have to wait until the great-grandchildren before I can give a name?” “Excuse me, you don't understand everything. You'll get older and wiser, and you can listen to what a father has to say.”

The son said to me, “By his third child, my father no longer had a father. He's been giving names himself since his third child. He understands that a person can give a name on his own. Why does he think that by my eleventh child I still don't understand how to give a name?”

Parents don't suddenly feel, “My son understands everything now. Perhaps he understands even better than I do. He has reached perfection.” There is no perfection in this world. We have to be prepared for that.

Somewhere a person has to say, “You know what? I'm going to step back.” Not because everything is settled or because my child has reached the level I hoped for. Perhaps this part of my task, this way of going about it, has reached its end.

What does *chinuch* mean?

Chinuch means teaching our children. It doesn't mean controlling them or making sure they do everything we want. If my goal is for them to learn, I need to look for the best way and the right time for that to happen.

Very often a person thinks that he only means to teach, without noticing that something else is going on. “It bothers me. I don't like what I see.” My son, my daughter, my son-in-law, my daughter-in-law—something about their conduct doesn't sit well with me. But am I responding because they need to learn something, or because I find it difficult to see?

It isn't easy to make that distinction and admit it to ourselves. Sometimes, if we were honest, we might acknowledge that if nobody else knew about it, we could remain quiet. But people know. The neighbor, the in-laws, the *rav*, the younger children will notice. What will they think about the way we brought up our child?

We all sometimes think about ourselves. But we need to recognize when that is part of what is driving us. Being uncomfortable with how something reflects on me isn't the same as teaching my child something he needs to learn.

And even when there is something worth teaching, we need to ask what is actually missing. Very often, what we want to tell our children, they already know. We speak as though this is something they need to hear for the first time.

Perhaps the work now is to help them want to do it, to make it easier, or to build some enthusiasm. Or perhaps I need to come to terms with the fact that he doesn't want to do it. I taught him. He doesn't want to. Perhaps it is too difficult for him. Perhaps this is something he doesn't need to do.

How often do parents go after the teacher who prepared their son or daughter for marriage? “Say it again. He doesn't understand.” What do you mean he doesn't understand? How many times have you already said it? Why do you think hearing it again from someone else will make him accept it?

The older children become, the more we have already taught them and the more they have already learned. Repeating the information isn't always what is missing. Especially when you know that another comment won't be received well, think about what you are trying to accomplish.

You don't have to say it this minute. Take a few minutes to consider why you want to say it and how you would say it.

Recognize the stage

While children are young and at home, use that time. Sometimes parents feel that things are more or less fine. The children listen, or they don't listen, and we let it go. Later, when they are older, something begins to bother us, and now we start looking for someone who will tell them what to do.

Those younger years are the time to put in the right effort, with plenty of prayer and *Hashem's* help. Don't wait until they have a home of their own to begin the work you wanted to do while they were growing up.

The relationship changes through the teenage years and into adulthood. When a child marries, something changes again. Your child has established a home and may already be raising children. You are still the parent. But before giving another instruction, consider the stage your child has reached and what kind of guidance can help now.

Chapter 2

Embrace your new child

Everyone wants to feel accepted and respected for who they are. When a son-in-law or daughter-in-law joins a new family, that need can be especially strong. They may already feel unsure of themselves, and even a small indication that they aren't good enough can hurt.

A daughter-in-law wrote to me: “Ever since I got married, I've felt judged and not good enough in my in-laws' eyes. I even apologized to my mother-in-law for marrying her son and not being special enough for her son, who is a very special person.”

She had tried sending poems and packages and had even had an open conversation on the subject. She wanted to know how she could improve the situation.

Think about what it means to feel that way in your husband's family. You feel degraded and unwanted. But I want to address the parents who read this and think, “My daughter-in-law could have written that.”

It's easy to begin explaining why, in your particular case, you have good reasons for not showing that acceptance, or why your daughter-in-law is misinterpreting your comments. You might even feel that you could explain to her exactly why her parents-in-law don't appreciate her. Don't do that. First sit with what it looks like from the other side.

What does this complaint say about you? What does it demand of you? What do your comments and gestures sound like and look like to the person receiving them? You may have explanations for everything. But as long as the other person doesn't understand them or relate to them, they aren't doing much to help the relationship.

Sometimes parents think that by marrying off a child, they've acquired another child to educate. You did your research when looking for a *shidduch*. Now that the *shidduch* has been made, embrace the new child and let him or her feel trusted and accepted. A small negative comment or a piece of unsolicited advice can leave a very different feeling.

“What do you mean? My son-in-law is still young and needs to be guided!” He may be young, and he may need guidance. But if he doesn't want that guidance from you, imposing it on him may accomplish very little and put a strain on the relationship.

If your children-in-law want to hear your advice, they'll let you know. Even when they do ask, you still need to be gentle and careful about how you answer.

A father-in-law and daughter-in-law

When you marry off your first son, there is another relationship to think about. You may already have sons-in-law, but a daughter-in-law is something new. It is worth stopping to consider how to approach it, rather than assuming that everything is the same.

Different families have different ways of conducting this relationship. In some homes there is more conversation and familiarity; in others, considerably less. I'm not setting out here exactly how every family should conduct itself. But a daughter-in-law isn't your daughter, and there needs to be an appropriate way of relating to her. The personalities involved and what each person finds comfortable also matter. Don't leave it entirely to whatever develops without giving it any thought.

At the same time, there is plenty of room to make her feel appreciated and to let your son hear good things about his wife. Sometimes a father can say a good word himself. Sometimes he can pass along something his wife said: “Mommy was saying how thoughtful your wife is.” However it is expressed, your son should hear that you notice her good qualities and are happy to have her in the family.

Everyone has their package

Every person has their own way of looking at things, understanding things, and behaving. As long as children are young, we sometimes look at the differences and think, “He's still young. He'll grow. I'll keep teaching him until he becomes more like me.” Then he gets older, and it hurts to see that he understands differently from me and behaves differently from me.

“I think a person should greet his wife when he comes home. That's what I've done all these years. He comes home and doesn't make anything of it.”

Of course, there are things that are more correct and less correct. But each person has their own way. Each couple, each husband, each wife. Perhaps your wife would never have liked being treated that way. Perhaps you would never have liked it. Your daughter-in-law may be comfortable with it.

Would she have liked more attention? Perhaps. But it isn't necessarily a problem. Very often we see something as a problem because it isn't the way we understand things.

Everyone has their package. Everyone has strengths, and everyone has shortcomings. Nobody is all strengths. Sometimes we make a *shidduch* and think, “Ah, I've found someone who is really perfect.” There is no such thing. Later we discover that it wasn't exactly what we thought.

A parent wrote to me about a son who had many good qualities. He was a dedicated learner, a *talmid chacham*, God-fearing, responsible, and pleasant. But the parent noticed ways in which he wasn't as considerate toward his wife as the parent thought he should be.

Could be. Could be his wife is so proud of his strengths and so pleased with him that these things don't bother her very much. Could be she notices them and would prefer something different, but still feels that she has a good husband. “After all, I have someone who is a *talmid chacham* and responsible.” That could also be.

I was speaking to someone who wasn't so pleased with one of his sons-in-law. During the conversation, he acknowledged that his son-in-law had many good qualities. In fact, he had particular strengths that his daughter might appreciate more than the other qualities he didn't have.

Like everyone else, he has strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps I would have preferred different strengths and different weaknesses. But perhaps for your daughter this is a good combination. It isn't what you like. It isn't what you need. It isn't your style. That is something we always have to take into account.

Sometimes someone gives a parent a good report about his child, and the parent can hardly take it in. “You saw him in the *beis medrash*. He made a good impression. You don't know how much we struggle with him.”

I once gave an older *Yid* a sincere compliment about his son. He smiled and said, “Shimon, you're still young. You'll see that a father is never satisfied with his own child. But thank you for the good word.”

Sometimes a parent notices something in his own child that he would hardly notice in another child. You see it in *shul*. A father's own boy moves the bench or makes a little noise with his fingers, and the father becomes nervous. Another boy makes much more noise, and it doesn't bother him nearly as much. It is his child. He notices more. He feels it more.

The same thing can happen when the children are married. A parent becomes upset about something in the couple's conduct that another person wouldn't even see as a problem. “But the other person doesn't understand. I know what my son should be doing.”

Perhaps. But perhaps it isn't as bad as it feels to you. The fact that you notice something and it bothers you doesn't by itself mean that something needs to be said. When parents are prepared for the fact that they will keep noticing things they don't like, they can become a little calmer. You don't have to wait until everything looks perfect before you can accept your child.

You helped choose this person

I've heard married children say, “I don't understand. My parents chose this person for me. Now they aren't pleased with my husband or wife, and I have to deal with that too?”

You looked into the suggestion, considered what you knew, and decided that this was a good person for your child. Perhaps afterward you discovered things you hadn't understood. That happens. But your child is now building a home with this person. Letting your disappointment show gives him something else to carry. Besides whatever he himself needs to work out in the marriage, he now feels that his spouse isn't good enough for you.

Ask yourself what you want your comments to accomplish. If there is a serious concern, it needs appropriate attention. But if you aren't suggesting that anything should be done, what are you

giving your child by repeatedly expressing how disappointed you are? Look for the good you can honestly appreciate, and let your child hear it.

Let him feel that he can please you

Very often, children would like to please their parents. They may already be holding back from things they would otherwise do because they know their parents wouldn't appreciate them. Then, every time they hear from the parents, there is another criticism. They didn't call enough. They didn't express themselves properly. Something else isn't right.

What feeling does that leave? “I'm trying, but I can't please you anyway.”

I remember a *yungerman* who was learning in *kollel* after his marriage. After a while, he began taking occasional jobs in a *cheder*, substituting or helping out. He was still learning, but sometimes he spent part of the day with children.

His father heard about it. “A *yungerman* like you should be growing in learning. You know, I think highly of you. You have potential. If you would really put in the effort, you could become something great.”

Then came a long explanation of why someone learning in *kollel* shouldn't spend half a day in *cheder*. It was suitable for someone who had no choice and needed the income, but why should his son do it?

Before long, the *yungerman* became a *melamed*. Now his father called with a slightly different argument. “Substituting once in a while, I can understand. Someone asks for a favor. You need a break. A few dollars in your pocket. But becoming a *melamed*? After seven or eight years in *kollel*, perhaps. It is a fine thing, I'm not saying otherwise. But not now.”

Later, the *yungerman* became a bus driver. “I hear you're driving a bus.” The father had to hear it from someone else by then. His son was no longer telling him what he was doing.

“Being a *melamed*, at least you're learning *Torah* with children. What could be sweeter? You're within the walls of the *beis medrash*. But driving a bus?”

Then he became a manager in a warehouse. “Driving children to *cheder*, at least you could play a good tape on the way. The *Baal Shem Tov* brought children to *cheder*. But a warehouse?”

The story didn't end there either. I don't know how it would have developed if the father had approached it differently. But imagine that first telephone call had been different.

“I hear you're substituting in *cheder*. I heard a good report about you. The teachers enjoy having you. I heard something good from the *kollel* too. I want you to know that I have real *nachas* from you.”

It takes a great deal of inner strength for a father who hoped his son would remain in *kollel* for years to make that call. But what was he teaching with the calls he actually made? “What you're doing isn't good in my eyes.”

If I can't please you as a substitute, why should I remain a substitute? If being a *melamed* isn't good enough either, why should I remain a *melamed*? I could make more money somewhere else.

You taught him the importance of learning. He knows. Perhaps that is why he chose work in a *cheder* in the first place rather than something else. If you can help him with a good word and a smile, help him. Another explanation of what you hoped he would become may not be what is missing.

Sometimes parents feel, “If my child understood me properly, he would know how much I think of him. I gave him a good word here and there.”

I heard a *rosh yeshivah* give an illustration. He asked his students who was the *Rambam's* greatest opponent. “The *Raavad*.” But look how much time the *Raavad* spent studying the *Rambam*. Look how much he agreed with. We notice the places where he disagrees and see him as the critic.

A parent can agree with so much, care deeply, and be extraordinarily devoted. A few comments that the child doesn't want to hear can still leave him with a very different picture of the relationship. Is that a fair picture? Perhaps not. But insisting that the picture is unfair doesn't change what your child is experiencing. Let him feel that he can please you. Let him know when he does.

Never fight sensitivity

Understanding personalities can help with this. If you read my book, *Get Along with Everyone*, or any book about understanding people and personalities, keep the information to yourself so you can better deal with those around you.

Going around telling people that you understand them very well and know how they think and feel is often unappreciated. Many people dislike being labeled an extrovert or introvert, high self-esteem or low self-esteem, and so on. Be careful with what you do with your newfound knowledge.

You don't have to read my book to know to be cautious. If you're prepared to err on the side of caution, that may be enough. For someone who finds it harder to be cautious, learning more about the people involved can help him avoid trying his luck and hurting the relationship.

One thing to remember when dealing with different personalities is that you should never fight sensitivity. When someone throws a hint and the other person gets offended, very often the person who gave the hint thinks the reaction went too far. “Come on, why did you take it

personally?” Sometimes they even say it clearly: “Get over it and grow up already.” That is never smart.

Some people try to undo sensitivity in younger children, assuming that it's possible because the child is still so young. Others challenge sensitivity in older people, thinking that the person is mature enough to understand that there's nothing to be offended about and see the situation more logically. These are big mistakes. Natural hypersensitivity doesn't evaporate just like that.

It's wonderful when people are willing to work on themselves and try to overcome their negative feelings, but you can't change them. Any criticism you give or imply may be taken the wrong way. Instead of helping them improve, it may hurt them and affect your relationship with them as well.

Your personal example

There is a form of education that you should always use. It doesn't only involve your children; it affects everyone around you. That is your personal example.

Even with younger children, your example is one of the strongest ways to teach. But you aren't with them in every situation. You can't always demonstrate what they should do in school or at bedtime, so you also have to teach and explain.

The older the child becomes, the less directing him works. And your children-in-law, by the way, have parents of their own. If you're concerned that they still have something to learn, let them learn from watching you. That influence happens naturally. It isn't optional. They see how you behave, and it affects them, hopefully for the better.

When your married children come into your home, they watch you closely. They're learning how to talk to their spouse. They're learning how to lead a *Shabbos* meal. They're learning how to greet people and how to be *ehrlich* at home. Think about it. Are you giving off the right impression?

As children get older, they begin to understand things they didn't understand before. Now that they have homes of their own, they may notice how their father conducts himself after a day of work, how he *davens*, and how he keeps his regular time for learning *Torah*. Your example can speak to them more than another instruction.

This subtle education has a lasting impact. You may have the option to preach, but you'll have a more effective influence by showing the right example than by commenting or being critical.

And when they come for a *Shabbos* meal, you can still share what is on your mind and in your heart. You can speak about meaningful things and give over something worthwhile to everyone at the table. You haven't stopped teaching. The more comfortable your children feel with you, the more they may be willing to hear and learn.

A genuine good word

Another way to teach and encourage is through genuine compliments. Instead of hinting where people are mistaken, compliment where they're successful.

Let me explain what I mean by genuine compliments. Some people misuse the idea and talk about the positive just to imply what they want. “Last week, you managed to deal with your daughter's tantrum so well.” Are you hinting that you're unhappy with how it was done this week?

A genuine compliment, not a hint, simply promotes the good and helps someone feel acknowledged, respected, and appreciated for what they do well. When there are no secret intentions or underlying negativity, a compliment encourages, educates, and spreads goodwill. Generally, when you're sincere, people won't misinterpret your intentions or think you're hinting at something you aren't.

There are also good things you can say about the marriage itself. Tell your daughter what you appreciate about her husband. Tell your son-in-law how happy you are to have him in the family. Let your son hear a good word about his wife. Sometimes a parent is looking so hard for what needs attention that he overlooks how much encouragement he could give.

But don't add the “but.” “My daughter is really so happy with you, but there's just one little thing…” Now you've turned the good word into another criticism. If you have something good to say, let it be a good word.

Everyone comes with strengths and shortcomings. You don't have to like every part of the package to let your children feel that you are happy with them.

The daughter-in-law who wrote to me also described what she saw in families where things were different: “The ones that show love and acceptance (even if the child knows it's hard for them to do so) are the ones with whom the children enjoy spending time and to whom they look to give *nachas*.”

Chapter 3

When their home is different from yours

“Should I just remain quiet and eat myself up over it, or may I say something nicely?” A father wrote to me that he had married off his son and was noticing things that didn't fit the way his own family conducted itself. Some of it had to do with his son's wife and her family, and some of it was that his son himself didn't have the same sensitivities.

He gave an example. His son had gone on an outing with his wife's family. The men and women were on the same boat, although separated. To this father, that wasn't appropriate for a *Chassidishe yungerman*. There were other things too, small points where he felt that his son should be conducting himself differently.

He wasn't asking whether he should shout at his son. He wanted to know whether he should say a word, or remain quiet and suffer over it.

Not everything is a *halachah*

First, we have to understand what kind of question we're discussing. If we're speaking about an explicit *halachah* in *Shulchan Aruch*, and you receive proper guidance that something needs to be said, especially when the child may not know the law, that is one thing. If we're speaking about a family standard or a sensitivity to a particular matter, we have to think carefully about what we are doing.

There are things a newly married child may genuinely not know. I remember that myself. There were simple laws in the kitchen, or things involved in running a *Seder*, that I had never paid attention to. I had never been the one taking care of them. Someone else had always made the preparations for *Shabbos*.

Now a father notices that his married son is still relying on what was done for him when he was a *bochur*. Sometimes a father can say, “My dear son, you've married now, and this is something you need to take care of.” There are things a child will appreciate hearing.

But not everything we're noticing is that kind of question. Not everything is a *halachah*, and not everything calls for correction. As people get older, they develop their own sensitivities. In some matters they may be more particular than their parents, and in others less. Almost everyone can see that in himself. There are things that speak to your child, just as there are things that speak to you.

I'm not speaking about *aveiros*. I'm speaking about the standards, preferences, and priorities that a person develops. Somewhere you have to recognize, and sometimes swallow, that certain things speak to your child a little differently than they speak to you.

Perhaps you see something and think, “This needs to be said.” Does it? Ask for *da'as Torah*. Find out whether, in these circumstances, this is actually a problem. Very often you may discover that it isn't as terrible as you thought.

That's why I gave the father's particular example. Some people will hear it and say, “What do you mean? Men and women on a boat? Separated or not, we don't do that.” Other people will say, “They were sitting separately. What is the question?” For one person this is a very serious matter, and another person doesn't understand what is bothering him.

Each person has things that he takes more seriously. But once another home enters the picture, there is more to consider. Perhaps your son wouldn't have done this if it hadn't mattered for his home. Perhaps you would have done it if it had mattered for yours.

Baruch Hashem, you were able to establish your home in a way that worked for you. Your wife was comfortable with it. Your son's wife may not be. That also has to enter into the consideration.

What will the younger children see?

There is another difficulty for parents. Sometimes, while a *bochur* is at home, they recognize that insisting on a particular thing isn't working. He is older, and they have to tolerate some differences. Then he marries, and a new concern enters. “What will the children at home see? Now he is a married man. They'll think that this is how people conduct themselves after marriage.”

It is understandable that this worries you. You aren't only thinking about this child. You are also thinking about what the younger ones will learn from watching him. That can make it harder to remain quiet.

But they are also watching how you deal with their older brother or sister. The way you respond is part of what they see. Your concern for the younger children doesn't, by itself, tell you that another comment will help. That too needs to be considered.

And the older child sees more now. Little children look at their parents as the grown-ups who understand. As they mature, they begin noticing the parents' shortcomings. You are trying to guide someone who now has opinions about the way you do things yourself. These are some of the reasons this relationship can become more strained as children get older.

What happens when you say something?

First, your son may take it personally. He's running a home. He has his own arrangements. What he might once have heard as a father educating a child may now sound to him like someone getting involved in his business.

Then there is the relationship between him and you. While he lived at home, he was coming home anyway. You would sit at a meal together, and perhaps later you would laugh together and make up. After marriage, how much he shares and how often he comes over depend much more on how comfortable he feels with you.

He tells you about an outing, and you tell him what you don't like about it. Next time he knows a little better what to tell you. “How was your vacation?” “Wonderful.” “What did you do?” He has learned that certain details aren't comfortable to discuss with you.

You want him to be open with you. You want him to feel comfortable. The relationship itself can accomplish more than the particular comment you want to make. When he is close to you, he may take your standards and wishes into account much more than when he feels distant. A comment that weakens that connection can leave you with less influence, not more.

And then there is his marriage. This may be the most important part. Even if he wants to accept what you say, even if he is respectful enough not to get upset with you, he has to bring the message home. Now he has to work it out with someone else. The outing was with her family. The practice comes from her parents' home. Your comment doesn't remain between you and your son.

This is part of what makes giving advice about someone else's marriage so delicate. In your own relationship, you can work on your part and see how the other person responds. Here you are giving your child a message to take into another relationship.

You can't make sure that he understands it exactly as you intended, that he gives it over in the right way, or that his wife hears it as you hoped she would. He may come away with something quite different: “My parents don't approve of my wife.” You meant to help, but you don't control what happens afterward.

Do you have to suffer over it?

A person asks, “So I should remain quiet and eat myself up?” I don't know that you have to eat yourself up. Very often we suffer over things that don't require that suffering.

Everyone would like to see their children follow the way handed down to them in every detail. But seeing your child become an adult, with certain things he has taken one way and certain things another way, doesn't always need to become such a painful matter.

Remaining quiet can also be a considered decision. You aren't necessarily deciding that the particular thing is right. You are considering whether saying something will help, and whether the relationship is worth more than another statement of your position.

Usually—not always—what you want to tell your children, they already know. Your son may know perfectly well that his father won't appreciate this outing. He tells you anyway, perhaps hoping you will be able to accept hearing about it. You don't necessarily have to make your position clear again.

Parents sometimes keep offering their opinion: “I don't like what you're wearing. I don't like where you went. I don't like what you said.” They already know.

When you are closer to your child, when you show acceptance and the connection is warm, he will often take your feelings into account more, not less. He knows what you would like. That doesn't mean you have to express enthusiasm about the particular thing you don't approve of. You don't have to say that you like it. But you can like your child. You can give him love and good words. You can speak nicely to him about his wife.

Every *Yid* needs a *rav*

There is something that I do think parents should teach their children, before marriage and afterward too, gently, without turning it into an argument about a particular incident. Every *Yid* needs a *rav*, someone to guide him. Looking into *Shulchan Aruch* and making every decision on one's own isn't the *Torah* way or the way we received from previous generations.

“Have a *rav*. Ask your *rav*. Your *rav* should know you.”

Of course, we mean an *ehrlicher rav*. We aren't discussing guidance from someone who isn't trustworthy in these matters. But sometimes a child has an *ehrlicher rav*, and his father doesn't like that particular *rav*. “Who are you asking? He's also a *rav*?”

That is your son's *rav*. He asked someone with *Torah*. You are not his *rav's rav*. Give him room to receive guidance. The fact that you would have asked someone else doesn't by itself mean that he isn't doing what you taught him to do.

Whether it is *shalom bayis*, *halachah*, *mesorah*, *minhag*, or a question of conduct, teach your child to ask. That doesn't mean that every time you notice something you start questioning him: “Did you ask your *rav*? What did he say? I want to hear exactly what you asked. Can I be on the telephone when you ask?”

If every consultation has to be reported back and approved by you, you haven't really stepped back. You are still trying to supervise the decision through the person he asked.

If there is a question about departing from a custom, that decision should also be guided by the *rav*. The point isn't to dismiss the matter. The point is that your child has someone appropriate to ask. You taught him to seek guidance. Somewhere you have to give him room to do that.

Another family is part of the picture

Remember, your son married into another family. You chose a *shidduch* with people you considered *ehrlich*. That didn't mean that they would do everything exactly as you do. They have their sensitivities and standards too.

I think almost everyone can point to something he took from his father-in-law's home—a *chumra*, a *kula*, or both. Your daughter-in-law has her own upbringing and family practices. To

keep educating your son as though he were alone, without a wife and without her family, isn't very practical.

You also want him to have *derech eretz* for his father-in-law. That belongs in the consideration too.

Not everything needs to be seen

Rashi tells us that *Avraham Avinu* passed away before seeing *Esav* turn to wrongdoing. That always makes me think. He passed away earlier, and *Esav* still went that way. Yet there was something good in *Avraham* not having to see it.

Of course, the differences we're discussing aren't comparable to *Esav's* conduct. The point I'm bringing out is simply that sometimes we don't need to see everything.

While children are young and in your home, you need to keep an eye on them. After marriage, sometimes you see and hear and notice things that you didn't need to know about. “Someone told me. Now I know. What am I supposed to do?”

One way to keep the relationship healthier is not to look at every detail in the first place. You don't have to notice everything. You don't have to hear every report. If someone begins telling you details that don't need your attention, you can say pleasantly that you would rather not discuss them.

This also needs judgment. You have to know when a particular approach applies. But being concerned for your child doesn't mean that you must constantly examine every part of the home he is building. Sometimes leaving those details alone is itself part of allowing the relationship to remain good.

Part 2 - Building the Relationship

Chapter 4

When to speak and when to remain quiet

The general rule is to let married children live their lives. But there are exceptions. Sometimes people take a rule and hide behind it even when something really does need attention. “I don't interfere. It's not my place.” There has to be room to understand the circumstances.

A mother wrote to me about a daughter who had married recently. *Baruch Hashem*, she looked happy. She enjoyed her husband's company, and they were having a good time together. But he hadn't yet found a *kollel* or a *chavrusa*, and he was calling her and talking to her throughout the day. She worked in the same office as her father, and he noticed that she wasn't getting much done.

“We know that we're not meant to interfere,” the mother wrote. “But we're concerned that she'll lose her job. Are we meant to give some gentle guidance? Should we suggest that she tell her husband that, as much as she loves speaking to him, she needs to work now? Or should we step back and let them make their own mistakes?”

First of all, *Baruch Hashem*, you're describing children who seem happily married. That is so much to be grateful for. It isn't everything, but it is one of the most important things in a person's life. When people are happily married, they can work through so many other challenges together. When they aren't, even small things can become major issues. Before you tamper with something as significant as that, appreciate what you have.

A message that can be heard

The parent's responsibility to consider the child's response isn't a new idea. We discussed the *halachah* about striking a grown son: even though the son is certainly responsible for his response, the father still has to consider what his own conduct may bring about. The child's obligation doesn't remove the parent's responsibility to think about what the child can receive.

Chazal tell us, “Just as it is a *mitzvah* to say something that will be heard, it is a *mitzvah* not to say something that will not be heard.” “He is my child. I see that he's making a mistake. Who else will tell him?” Those may be understandable thoughts. But you still have to consider whether this is a message he can hear.

Often, when someone asks me whether to say something, he has already tried. “Tell me the truth. Have you said it before?” “Yes, many times. It doesn't seem to work.” Then you have already told me something important. You aren't only asking whether the idea is correct. You are telling me that the way you have been giving it isn't being received.

And if you haven't tried yet? Sometimes, with a younger child, you might say, “Try once and see how he takes it.” With married children, I wouldn't be so quick to say that. Even the first comment can leave the child feeling watched or judged. You don't always get to try it once without affecting the relationship. Think before trying, too.

When there is a place to speak

When a child clearly asks for your opinion, it is generally fine to give your opinion and be honest about it. You don't have to say, “You can't speak to me about this. I don't meddle.” They are asking you.

There are also parents who know that their relationship is close and comfortable enough for a suggestion to be appreciated. That doesn't only mean that the child will listen and comply. It means that he will be glad you brought it to his attention.

A lot of people fool themselves about this. But if you really know that your child appreciates hearing from you, you don't have to become afraid because you read somewhere that parents mustn't say anything. There is no absolute rule that a parent may never offer a word to a married child.

You might even ask first, “Would it bother you if I said something?” If you know you can say it properly and the child wants to hear it, perhaps you should.

Sometimes a person comes home from a *simchah*, or after giving a *derashah*, and discovers that there was a piece of cake in his beard all along. Nobody said anything. He wishes someone had told him. There are things people want to hear. The question is whether this is one of those things, whether you are the right person to say it, and whether you know how to say it.

Another exception is danger. It is sad when someone is in an abusive or genuinely dangerous situation and a parent is afraid to say anything because “I'm not meant to interfere.” Even if your child has been married for many years, if something dangerous is happening to them or to one of their children, you need to find out what to do and how to do it. Discuss it with someone who can guide you. It would be a shame to regret remaining quiet when something needed to be done.

Sometimes something needs to be said, but another person could say it better. Then perhaps you shouldn't be the one. If there is no one else who can give the necessary input, that is another consideration. But these exceptions need to be assessed. Make sure you aren't deciding that this is an exception simply because it is your child and you feel strongly about it.

The way you say it

Even if you have established that you should say something, you still need to be very careful. The time, the tone, the words themselves, and what they imply all matter. Is the person stressed? Are you speaking in front of the spouse? Could your words sound condescending?

In the case of the young woman at work, you might mean to speak about her job, but a small implication about her husband not being in *kollel* changes the whole message. You don't know what you just caused.

It is one thing to decide that a suggestion about the job is appropriate. But is everything about the way you're giving it appropriate? Are you making sure not to bring something else into it?

People often look for a roundabout way to communicate and overlook the benefit of being straightforward. There is a story of a Polish *Yid* waiting nervously at Ellis Island, hoping to enter America. The official asks, “How old are you?” He doesn't answer. The official asks again.

The fellow behind him whispers in Yiddish, “Yankel, they're asking how old you are.” “I know. I'm trying to decide whether to tell them I'm older than I am or younger.” “Why don't you tell them how old you actually are?” “Oh, I didn't think of that.”

Sometimes we are so busy looking for the indirect way that the simple way doesn't occur to us. Hinting may seem attractive. Perhaps the message will get across without the hurt feelings of direct criticism. But it can be like trying to kill a mosquito by aiming the long straw of a can of WD-40 into its microscopic mouth. If it works, wonderful. What are the chances of getting it exactly right?

A hint that is too subtle isn't understood. Now you're frustrated and tempted to say it more strongly. A less subtle hint may be taken much more sharply than you meant.

If criticism is warranted, you are the right person to offer it, and it should be said, say it clearly and gently. Why hint? If you aren't sure it will be received well, often the better choice is to remain quiet.

This isn't only about criticism. If the other person is open to hearing your opinion about something personal, say it in a clear, pleasant way. You don't need to leave them figuring out what you really meant.

When your child asks for advice, that is different from offering an opinion nobody requested. But even then, remember that there is another person involved. Your son may appreciate your advice, while his wife feels uncomfortable with your involvement. Your daughter may welcome what you say, but the advice also affects her husband.

You can answer gently and leave room for the couple to discuss it. “This is what I would suggest, but see what your wife thinks.” Or, “Only if your husband is comfortable with it.” The fact that your child asked doesn't mean that your answer should now settle the matter for both of them.

After you have said it

A child asks, “Tatty, Mommy, do you think we should buy a house? Should we take this job?” You give your opinion. Then come the questions. “So did you do it? You didn't? What did they say? We spoke about this, and I haven't heard from you. Why is it still happening?”

The fact that the initial suggestion was appropriate does not mean that following up is appropriate too. Even being asked for advice doesn't mean that now you are supervising the decision. You wanted to say something. You said it. If your child answers, “No, I don't think that's a problem,” you don't have to argue back and prove the point.

You can also offer an opinion with a little uncertainty, which makes it easier to hear. “Maybe it's just my perspective. I'm not even sure. I'm throwing it out there.”

Compare that with, “I see what you're doing. I understand that you're young, but this isn't going to work.” Now you're telling the person how wrong they are. The more certain and personal you make it, the harder it can be to accept.

If the answer is, “No, that's not an issue,” you can say, “Okay, I was just voicing a concern. I'm not sure myself.” Don't wait for the child to acknowledge that you are right.

And don't make the problem bigger in order to make the child take you seriously. “What? That's what happened? I can't believe it. This is terrible. You don't know where this can lead.”

Very often, normalizing the difficulty helps more. “I understand. Things happen. I went through something similar.” You may be discussing a marital difficulty or another challenge. The fact that you can speak calmly and show that it is something people deal with can itself be helpful.

You can also suggest, “Perhaps discuss it with someone.” Make it less between you and your child. It doesn't need to be, “I'm telling you, and you have to take it from me, and I'm going to see whether you did.”

When a child comes to you about a difficulty, you can appreciate that he came, take him seriously, and help him find someone appropriate to speak to. You can make seeking help feel normal rather than make him feel that something terrible has happened.

There is something else you can make clear: “It's your choice. It isn't going to change my opinion of you or my relationship with you. Don't feel guilty if you decide differently.”

I hear so often from children who feel judged and intimidated. “Now I can't go for *Yom Tov*. They'll ask me about this. They'll ask my child about that.” Apart from not making the decision personal, you can actually tell them that it isn't personal.

Keep your advice focused on what can be done now. Sometimes a parent offers criticism about something that has already happened. “Why did you do that? I told you not to.” If something is relevant now, assess whether it should be said. But going over what should have been done, when it no longer helps, only adds to the hurt.

In the mother's question, I don't think the parents should say anything. I think they should be happy that their daughter is happily married and allow the couple to grow. Hopefully he will find a *kollel* and she will work things out. If they encounter a difficulty, their good marriage will help them deal with it.

You can wait before speaking

A friend who became a *rav* went to receive a blessing for his new position. He asked what he needed to know. “For the first two years, don't say anything to anyone.”

He told me, “Finally I have a position. I was already waiting to give my first *derashah*, to ask someone why I don't see him at the evening *shiur*, to speak to someone about talking during *davening*. And now I should say nothing?”

First build a relationship. Be patient. Understand the people. Then you will have a better idea of what needs to be said and when.

A *yungerman* told me that his father-in-law had hardly ever said anything to him about how to conduct himself. When he began marrying off his own children, his father-in-law called him over. “I want to give you the guidance I received before I began marrying off children. Three things.”

This was unusual. In twenty years, his father-in-law had never called him over to give him guidance. “Don't speak. Don't speak. And don't speak.”

That doesn't mean that you can never say anything. First remain quiet. Give yourself time to understand whether something needs to be said, how much, and in what way. Should I say it? How should I say it? Which words should I use? How will it be received?

Remaining quiet for the moment doesn't mean that you can never speak. You still have the opportunity. Once the words have been said, taking them back is much harder.

Chapter 5

Helping without taking over

With intelligence and sensitivity, some parents have successfully helped improve their children's marriage. But it isn't so common for parents to be actively involved and still keep their eyes only on what is good for the child and the marriage.

Someone wrote to me that, although people often say to keep parents out of a marriage, in their case it was the father who saved the marriage. “My father works in *chinuch* and *shalom bayis*, and he's very knowledgeable in these matters. When we had difficulties in our marriage and had

nowhere to turn, my father reached out to offer his help in a very sensitive way, and I gratefully grabbed the opportunity."

The writer understood that this couldn't work in every situation. But sometimes, the letter pointed out, parents are so afraid to say anything that they don't offer help when it could be important.

That is true too. The difficulty is that parents are subjective. They have intense feelings for their struggling child. Unintentionally, they may give advice that is more about their child than about the relationship. Sometimes their own hopes and expectations get mixed in too. Leaving all that out of the picture is a tall order.

Are you the right person to help?

It isn't only a father working in *chinuch* and *shalom bayis* who can help. Nor does working in those fields mean that he is the right person to help his own children. Even the most skilled parents—and sometimes specifically those—may not be the ones who should help their children's marriage. It isn't because they don't understand marriage. It is because the parent-child relationship can get in the way.

On the other hand, sometimes a parent can be helpful where another person cannot. The situation has to be considered with its particular people and circumstances, and with *Hashem's* help. Often you need a wise person to help determine whether this is a suitable arrangement before beginning, or even once you're already involved.

It also takes maturity on the child's side. Discussing your private life with a parent whom you see often can be awkward. Even when the parent knows how to offer clear, gentle advice, the child has to be able to receive it and work with it properly. Both sides need to be ready for that arrangement.

I remember a man coming to me, perplexed. Many people turned to him for advice and felt that his words were on target. One of his sons-in-law had reached out, and he had been able to help his daughter's marriage very carefully, without her even knowing about his involvement.

Then another child was struggling with something personal, and that child wouldn't allow him to help. "How could I help my son-in-law with a marriage issue, which is even more sensitive, and not be able to help my own child?"

What works in one relationship doesn't necessarily work in another. This isn't only about something as delicate as *shalom bayis*. It can apply even to helping build a *sukkah*. A parent thinks, "If only they would let me help!" A child thinks, "How come other people's parents can help them, and mine can't?"

It may have to do with personalities or other factors. The helper and the recipient have to be a suitable match. Neither parent nor child should be offended when the other feels that this isn't the right arrangement.

Is the help still helping?

Being suitable at one stage doesn't mean being suitable forever. Sometimes parents can be instrumental during a crisis. Later, they need to hand over the reins. In other cases, a parent can help with ordinary difficulties, but once the situation becomes more serious, it goes beyond what they can handle. Both people need to notice when that changes.

There is also something that can happen slowly, even when the help began well. A parent becomes the person the child always turns to, the person who provides the understanding and support. It can begin to look like a second spouse. What originally helped the marriage develops into a dependence that gets in the way of the marriage.

The fact that there is less stress, or that the child is less angry at the spouse, doesn't by itself show that the help is working. Is the marriage becoming healthier? Is the connection between husband and wife becoming better and stronger? Keep checking what the help is accomplishing.

Sometimes children turn to their parents because that's what they're used to doing. Sometimes they don't yet know how to work something out on their own. It's fine to appreciate that they came to you, and it's wonderful when children value their parents' advice. But you can also encourage them to turn to each other.

“What does your spouse say?” “Did you discuss it with your husband?” “I think the two of you could figure this out together.” You can help without becoming the person through whom every decision goes.

Sometimes the husband and wife are coming to the parents together. Even then, they may need encouragement to speak to each other and hear what the other thinks. Doing things together isn't the same as discussing things with each other.

Sometimes a husband feels that his wife turns to her mother for everything, and he assumes that his mother-in-law is encouraging it. That isn't necessarily what is happening. I've spoken to parents who themselves felt overwhelmed by how much their married children depended on them. Before blaming the parent, find out what you are actually dealing with.

And sometimes the constant involvement takes away from the parents' own marriage. A mother can spend so much time discussing every question with her married daughters that her husband hardly has time with her. The children have homes to build, but the parents also have a marriage that needs their attention.

Not answering every call immediately doesn't mean cutting yourself off from your child. Sometimes a question can wait. You can remain warm and available without being available every minute. Giving the couple some room to work things out can help them become more independent and turn to each other.

When your child is struggling

There is a difference between seeing something you don't like in your child's marriage and seeing that your child is genuinely struggling. If the couple are comfortable with each other, but their way of doing things doesn't suit you, that is one question. If your child is suffering and doesn't know where to turn, that needs attention. Being careful about involvement doesn't mean looking away.

But recognizing that help is needed doesn't necessarily mean that you are the person who should provide it. I spoke to a very wise and *ehrlich* father whose child was having serious difficulties. He understood that he couldn't handle the matter himself. What he could do was look for the right person to help. He wasn't ignoring what was happening. He was thinking carefully about how something could actually be accomplished.

Sometimes a parent feels, “I have to save my child,” and rushes in. Unfortunately, that involvement can make things worse. You want to help, but you still need to consider who can be helpful, how to approach the situation, and what your own part should be.

When concern becomes another problem

Children often turn to parents because that is what they have always done. “I have a problem. I go to Tatty. I go to Mommy.” Now something bothers them at home, and they call the person they have always leaned on.

They may not even complain openly. “I have time to talk now. My husband isn't home anyway. It's only eight-thirty. He usually doesn't come before nine.” The message comes across, and a concerned parent responds.

“Your husband said that? He should be taking better care of you. Why are you going home yourself? Where is he?” Or a parent says to a son, “What do you mean you bought breakfast? Your wife didn't make you breakfast? She's not working today.”

The concern may be genuine. But what does it do to the couple? Someone who had been comfortable with an arrangement now begins to look at it differently. Someone else wonders, “What did she tell my mother? Why is my mother saying this to me?” Resentment begins to build.

Sometimes it starts with questions. “You don't look so happy. Is everything all right? Are you sure he's treating you nicely? If there's a problem, let me know. You're still young; you may not realize.”

The parent is concerned. But the child may have been comfortable until these questions started. Now she begins to wonder whether something is wrong because her parents seem to think so. The parent wanted to help. The child wanted help. The result is working against both of them.

Sometimes a parent will even say openly, “Yes, that's what I wanted. I don't like how they conduct themselves. She leads him by the nose. I wanted to say something so that he would take a stand, even if it caused some friction between them.”

Is that right? Is that *Torah'dig*? Is that *ehrlich*? A parent may have strong feelings about what is happening in the child's home. But wanting the couple to become upset with each other because you don't like their arrangement is something you have to examine honestly.

Some subjects need particular care because they are so private. A suggestion about which car to buy isn't the same as a suggestion about when a couple should have another child. Those are matters for the husband and wife to discuss together and bring for appropriate *Torah* and medical guidance. A parent may mean well and still enter a part of the marriage where the involvement is unwelcome and hurtful.

Even a passing comment can have an effect. “Another baby already?” “I don't know how you'll manage.” You may think you're expressing concern, but the couple can come away feeling embarrassed about something they had been happy to share. Before commenting, consider what you know about their circumstances and what your words will do.

And if something has already been said, the couple should first discuss it with each other. Don't immediately turn it into an argument about whose mother is wrong or who is allowing too much involvement. Understand what bothered your spouse and work out together how to respond respectfully.

Sometimes the concern begins with what a parent thinks he sees. A father once called me about his son-in-law. “They told me certain things about him. I thought I was getting a particular kind of son-in-law, and he isn't what I expected.” “What is the problem?” “My daughter isn't happy. She needs help.” “Did she tell you that?” “No, but I can see it. The spark, the glow—it isn't there.”

Perhaps he was noticing something real. Perhaps she wasn't happy. I didn't know. But I asked him not to make it into an issue with his daughter. “But she won't know to go for help. She just got married.”

He wanted to help. But there was also so much encouragement he could give: a genuine good word about his son-in-law, how pleased he was to have him in the family, something positive his daughter could hear about her husband. And if he couldn't say that without adding a “but,” it was better to remain quiet.

Someone who helps you feel better

The same thing can happen with a friend. *Chazal* speak about sharing a worry with another person. A listening ear can be a great help. But you can turn to someone because you want to feel better, and come away with a bigger problem.

“Your husband said that to you? I can't believe it!” The friend may really care. But if the conversation leaves you more resentful toward your spouse, what has it accomplished?

Sometimes there may even be a feeling of competition with your spouse. The friend wants your attention and wants to show that she's the one who's really there for you. Whatever is behind it, notice what the conversation is doing. You called because you needed help, and now you're becoming more upset with your spouse.

You can end the conversation nicely. “I hope you don't mind, but I have to go now.” You don't have to keep listening to advice that's making things worse at home.

“But I need someone to talk to. I need someone there for me.” You do. It is difficult to go through challenges alone. That doesn't mean that every person who takes your side is helping you.

A friend can listen, understand, and help you get over a difficult moment. You hang up feeling calmer, and now it is easier to be pleasant at home. That is something valuable.

Other people offer advice that supposedly worked for them. “I'll tell you what I did. She told me to come home earlier, so I came home two hours later.” He's not telling you that they didn't speak for three weeks. He's not telling you what it did to the atmosphere at home. You hear the clever account of how he got his way, not necessarily what really happened afterward.

Even if something did work for someone else, it may not work for you. Every relationship has its own personalities, circumstances, and background. You cannot compare them that way.

Sometimes friends don't even give advice. Just doing what they do becomes your explanation. I've heard from a *yungerman* who stayed out with friends until three in the morning and couldn't understand why his wife was upset. “All the others were married too. They stayed out as late as I did.”

Did they tell you that their wives appreciated it? Perhaps each one went home and used the others as his explanation. Everyone was doing it because everyone else was doing it.

A good friend can encourage you. “Don't worry. Last week was good. Calm down. Take a rest. You know what you can do.” Support that helps you return to your relationship in a better frame of mind is different from support that teaches you to fight.

Having a direction

The same question matters when you turn to someone for guidance: what is the help accomplishing? It isn't enough that the person came highly recommended. What happens when you go there?

There is a place to describe what bothers you and have it heard. But if every conversation makes the grievances larger, and each session leaves someone feeling like the loser, you need

to notice that. Are you receiving clarity and direction, or are you becoming more upset with one another? This doesn't mean you shouldn't seek help. It means you need help that helps.

I tell people who come to me: if after two or three meetings you don't feel that you have some direction and some gradual improvement, please don't keep coming simply because you started with me. You should be able to say, “Now I understand something. Now I have something to try. It helped a little; perhaps doing more of it will help further.”

I remember a telephone call. “Is this Gruen? Do you make *shalom bayis*?” “In my own home, I try.” I can try to help you make *shalom bayis*. I can't do it for you. If you come expecting that someone else will do it, you're going to be disappointed.

There is no magic in a therapist, a course, a book, or an idea. They may help you understand what you can do. They may give you encouragement and a desire to try. But they don't do the work instead of you.

People ask, “How do I get my wife to go for help? How do I get my child to go?” You can come and hear what you can do. You don't have to begin by getting someone else to change. You may find that there is more within your own ability than you thought.

A child can come to you with something important. “My husband doesn't keep a regular time for learning *Torah*.” Or, “My wife doesn't want to continue a certain *minhag*.” Something meaningful is bothering them.

You can hear them and say, “I understand what you're going through. I understand that you want me to help. I don't think I'm the person for this. I'll tell you someone you can speak to. As a matter of fact, when I had difficulties, I also spoke to that person. I learned so much.”

What does that do for a child who thought that Tatty and Mommy always had everything worked out? “My mother also had someone to speak to?” You have made it more normal to get guidance. Not everything goes exactly as a person expected. There is someone who can help. You don't have to take the whole matter into your own hands.

You can also make clear that you are still there for the child. “If you need me, come back to me. If you need help paying for the guidance, I'll try to help.” That doesn't mean the child has to report every conversation to you. You can help make guidance available without becoming part of everything discussed.

When you give something over

When you give something over, give it over. Choose someone who can responsibly try to help. But once the matter is being attended to, the constant following up—“But this, but that, what happened, what did you say?”—can become another problem.

Sometimes parents keep looking for another person who will get through to the child. “I called his *rav*. I spoke to the *rosh kollel*. Perhaps his manager can say something. Who else should I call?”

You understand how difficult this is for them. They want to help their child. But they've already tried so many times, and it hasn't worked. Now they put in more and more effort, looking for the next person who might finally make him understand. Somewhere you have to recognize that finding another person to tell him isn't necessarily going to help.

I remember a father who told his son before marriage that he didn't think he would be the right person to turn to if difficulties arose. He offered access to guidance instead. He had a card on file and was sponsoring other people too, so he wouldn't know whether his son had used it.

“Whenever you need, you have someone to help you. You don't have to worry that I'll know. I'll help you with that.” The father was genuinely concerned and made help available without making the child feel watched.

Being right doesn't mean you helped

Sometimes the difficulty isn't whether the parent understood the situation. He may have understood it very well. But how did his words reach the child?

A *yungerman* once told me about losing his job, quarreling with his employer, and getting into serious financial difficulties after making unwise decisions. I asked whether he could turn to his father for some help.

His father? He wanted nothing to do with him. Beforehand, his father had shouted at him that he was irresponsible, that he would lose money, and that he would be left with debts. “That's how he speaks to his son? Now I should go to him?”

I was thinking that his father had understood the situation quite well. He had warned him about precisely what ended up happening. But the son wasn't thinking about how right his father had been. He was still angry about how his father had spoken to him.

The father wanted to prevent a problem. The warning didn't prevent it, and afterward the resentment was still there.

Help should not become control

The way help is offered matters too, especially when the child depends on you financially. I once met a man who asked whether the same approach applied in families where a father-in-law supports a *yungerman* so that he can learn in *kollel*. Yes, the question of the relationship still applies.

The fact that you are giving money doesn't make the effects of your comments disappear. Your child doesn't necessarily hear, “Since you're supporting me, of course you can say that.” Very often the feeling is, “I'd rather not receive the help if this is what comes with it.”

It is a great mistake to use a child's dependence to control him. A *yungerman* once told me that his father had a difficult relationship with every one of his children. “I thank *Hashem* that he doesn't have money. If he had money, the problems would be much harder.”

What a shame when help becomes leverage that makes people's lives difficult. Sometimes a parent is pleased with the results. “They listened. They did what I wanted.” But how are they left feeling? You may have gotten them to do things your way without noticing how resentful and uncomfortable they are.

Almost nobody sees himself as manipulative or controlling. We can usually explain why what we're asking is reasonable. Still, think about how it looks to the person receiving it. Perhaps they're misunderstanding you. But perhaps there is something you haven't noticed about your own approach.

You want your children to love you and feel connected to you. Getting them to do what you wanted doesn't necessarily bring that connection. Nor does proving afterward that you understood better than they did.

A parent may have to step back even from the decision about receiving help. The child is old enough to take the help, to decide not to take it, and to work out how to use it. You can offer something valuable without taking responsibility for every decision that follows.

Does the help only feel good, or does it bring the desired result? Does it make the helper look good, or does it promote the well-being of the people involved? Even when everyone began with the best intentions, keep looking at what the help is actually doing.

Chapter 6

Making it comfortable to stay connected

“Do I have to go running after my children? What happened to *kibbud av va'eim*?” A parent wrote to me that the children had moved away. At first it was supposed to be temporary, but it became permanent. What hurt most was the disconnection that followed.

“We have so little connection with our grandchildren that when we do travel for an occasion, it leaves us wondering why we're spending so much money and energy to be part of an occasion with grandchildren whom we barely know.”

The parent wanted the children to understand what it meant to be included in their lives. A call, an email, a letter—there were so many ways to keep the connection. The children represented the work and investment, the letter said, while the grandchildren were the source of *nachas*. It was painful to feel left with only the hard part.

We discussed how offering advice and assistance can affect the relationship. But sometimes the difficulty is that there is hardly enough contact for those questions to arise. The children are building their lives, and the parents feel left outside them.

There is no question that maintaining the connection is important. Children should understand what it means to their parents, and grandchildren benefit from knowing their grandparents. But I don't want parents to read this and become even more hurt because now they have another explanation of what their children should be doing.

What you can do on your side

You can be right about what someone else should do and still have room to do something on your own side. You may not be obligated to initiate. But instead of waiting for the children to change their perspective, to read something or hear a *shiur* that will inspire them, you can make the calls, visit, give compliments, and send gifts.

I'm not condoning the children's behavior. Enabling someone to abuse or take advantage of you is a different discussion. But building a healthy connection is something you can do instead of carrying the resentment and waiting for someone else to do what is right.

What the other person hears

Often, effective investment in a relationship is done on the other person's terms. Show interest in what matters to them. Ask questions they feel comfortable answering. Connect in ways that are meaningful to them.

Not everyone appreciates the same kind of interest. “I'm doing the same thing with all my children, so this child must be the problem” is a serious mistake. The principle of *chanoch lana'ar al pi darko*—understanding the individual child—applies here too. If the questions that help you connect with one child bother another, notice that.

It would be wonderful if the child could say, “I'm sure you don't mean anything, but it bothers me when you ask about this. Can we discuss other things?” Sometimes they don't explain it so clearly. Then you have to learn their pattern. If something works, do more of it. If it doesn't, try something else.

A married young man once complained to me about his mother's questions. They hit a raw nerve. She kept asking about his day and the details of his life. Then he stopped. “You know, it's funny. My father asks the same questions, and I appreciate them.” It took time for him to understand the difference, but eventually he could explain it.

“When my father asks, I feel that he's encouraging me. He's happy for me, proud of me, and trusts me. With my mother, I can hear the criticism in a little grunt. I feel like she's expecting me to mess up. I finish telling her something, and the response leaves me feeling that she's not impressed.”

So often, it isn't what you say but how you say it. Sometimes there is also something going on that the parent doesn't see.

A mother asks her daughter, “Hi, Shifra! How's Yossi doing? Is the reading tutor working out?” She wants a little *nachas* and to feel part of her daughter's life. But Shifra is already frustrated by how slowly Yossi is progressing. Her mother's question feels like pestering.

“Fine. Can I call you later?” “Okay.” Now the mother is hurt by the curt response. She wanted to show interest. Her daughter was hearing the question from a very different place.

Sometimes parents wonder why a decision seemed so sudden. “They never discussed moving. First it was temporary, then it was permanent. What happened?”

Perhaps something did change. But perhaps it wasn't comfortable to discuss it with you. Could it be that they were afraid of your reaction? Have they felt controlled or intimidated when they shared plans before? Was it easier to present the decision as sudden than to go through the discussion?

I'm not saying that this is what happened. It is something to consider before deciding that their conduct is inexplicable.

Sometimes one parent is more accepting than the other. The accepting parent is hurt too, without realizing that the child would have shared with them but wanted to avoid the other parent's reaction. Be careful not to turn that into a *shalom bayis* issue. Just try to understand what sharing may feel like from the child's side.

Parents also need to remember that they may one day need their children. Sometimes we don't take that into account when we speak. A word here, another comment there, something else that bothers us. It builds up. Later, the parents wonder why the children don't want to come, why they aren't available to help, why everything has become so difficult.

I'm not saying that the children are right. But this is something that happens. Before saying another word, think about what it may do to the connection. You can spare yourself a great deal of heartache.

Appreciate the sharing

Another person wrote to me after thinking about how little they shared with their own parents. “When my children get married, how will I feel if they share with us the same amount of information I share with my parents?”

There were good marks from the children, little recordings, letters, ordinary *nachas*. Until then, the writer hadn't considered how much those small things could mean.

It is wonderful when children realize that. But parents can help make the sharing pleasant. “You sent me a picture of the children. Where did you buy those fancy clothes? The sales haven't started yet!” “You went on an outing with Moishy? Wasn't he supposed to be in school?”

The child sends a good mark. “Is she doing better in this subject than in the others, and you're not telling me?” When sharing becomes unpleasant, people think twice about doing it again.

And it isn't only about avoiding criticism. Let them see that you appreciate the news. Some parents assume the children know. Others feel entitled to the information and don't think to express appreciation. If you feel something, say something. Let them know what those little pieces of *nachas* mean to you.

The comfort zone

Visits have the same sensitivity. A parent wrote that when grandchildren misbehave, the daughter-in-law may feel that everyone is watching her and judging her parenting. The suggestion was to make light of it: “Kids will be kids. I did the same thing.”

For some people that is exactly what helps. Others hear it as proof that you noticed the behavior, and it makes them less comfortable. Even a question like, “What are those pimples on Chaim's face?” can sound to one child like concern and to another like a cross-examination.

Meaning well isn't enough. You have to think about what the other person is hearing.

The same consideration applies before you visit. Perhaps your family always had an open door. People came and went without calling, and everyone enjoyed it. That doesn't mean your daughter-in-law or son-in-law finds it comfortable. They may come from a different kind of home or simply prefer to know when someone is coming. Don't assume that because nobody objected, the arrangement works for them. A quick call beforehand can spare a great deal of discomfort.

But giving notice also means being clear. “We might come over this afternoon” can leave someone waiting, preparing something, or giving up a nap. If your plans change, let them know. The point isn't only that you said something before arriving. It is to consider what the other person may be arranging around your visit.

Sima has just given birth. An hour before *Shabbos*, her cousin Chaya arrives with a complete *Shabbos* package, from soup to nuts. She's delighted to help. Before leaving, she promises to visit again on *Shabbos* afternoon because she'd love to see the baby.

Sima unpacks the food, overwhelmed. “Why did she bring all this? I have big girls who can help me cook. If I needed help, I would have asked. What does she think I am, a *schlemazel*? And why is she coming tomorrow? Doesn't she remember how a person feels three days after giving birth?”

Chaya goes home feeling wonderful. “What a devoted cousin I am. She looked exhausted. There's nothing like fresh, home-cooked food and a warm visit to help her get back to herself.”

Who is right? Who is wrong? Before deciding, understand what each one is seeing. One person feels that she gave so much. The other feels that she wasn't understood at all.

Sometimes you work hard to make your home warm and relaxed, and you can't understand why a child still doesn't enjoy coming. But what feels relaxed to you may feel uncomfortable to someone else. The meal begins whenever everyone is ready, while your daughter-in-law would feel calmer knowing what time the children will eat. You let the grandchildren do almost anything, while their parents become nervous watching them get carried away.

Or you want your children-in-law to feel like family, so you leave them to help themselves. They might feel more comfortable being treated a little more like guests. Your way may be welcoming to one person and unsettling to another. Notice what actually helps the people coming to your home, rather than assuming that because the atmosphere is relaxed, everyone must enjoy it.

Some people have a natural way of making everyone comfortable. If you don't, don't beat yourself up over it, and don't deny it and blame everyone else. Your intentions may be harmless while your approach still feels intimidating. It is worth thinking about.

You need to be comfortable too

Making your children comfortable doesn't mean that anything goes in your home. If the grandchildren are breaking things and you need their parents to supervise them, you can say so gently and respectfully. It is a favor to both sides. Otherwise resentment builds, you invite them less, and you spend less time together.

“Rivka, please make sure your children don't touch the glasses.” Or, “Rivka, can you put the glasses on a higher shelf while you're here? I'll feel better knowing they won't get broken.”

You can overlook some things and be more tolerant. You also need to feel comfortable enough to enjoy having them there. They should feel appreciated, and you should be able to appreciate their presence.

Knowing when to remain quiet doesn't mean that you have to be afraid of your children. Some parents are afraid to say that they want to begin the *Shabbos* meal because their son is still busy. What do you mean? It's your home. You aren't telling him how to run his home. You're saying when you would like to begin the meal in yours.

“We'd like to start a little earlier. Please try to come home from *shul* right away.”

“But perhaps he won't want to come.” You can think about that. How important is it that he comes? What are you prepared to accommodate? But a parent can still say what works for him, gently and pleasantly.

Giving a married child room doesn't mean that you're no longer his parent. If he speaks to you disrespectfully, sometimes there is a place to say something. You are speaking about how you're being treated. That is a different question from telling him how to run his home. The fact that he has married doesn't mean that you have to accept disrespect.

The same applies to practices in your home that you want respected. Something may affect the younger children or interfere with the way you run your home. You can ask them to be considerate. “I understand that you do things differently. Here at home, though, this is something we try to maintain, and I'd appreciate your respecting that while you're here.”

But even when the request is reasonable, think about what may follow. Perhaps they will understand and accommodate it. Perhaps they will become uncomfortable and come less often. That doesn't automatically mean that you shouldn't say anything. It means that you need to consider how important the matter is and what you are prepared to accept. Speak gently and at the right time, without making them feel looked down upon. And recognize that even a carefully worded request may not be received as you hoped.

Different arrangements can work

Parents are often told that less pressure makes children more interested in visiting. That is true for many people, but it isn't always so simple. Some need repeated invitations to feel wanted. If they don't hear enough, they wonder whether you really want them. Others will only be tempted to come if they know they will receive VIP treatment, with just the right balance of attention and privacy.

Sometimes parents try hard and still don't get it right. It may be the child, the child-in-law, or the dynamics of their marriage. I've seen this many times. One-on-one guidance may help you understand how to relate to a challenging or self-entitled child and what approach is workable. And sometimes trying is all you can do.

There isn't only one arrangement that works. Some young couples prefer spending *Shabbos* at home, just the two of them. Others enjoy going to their parents while it is still easier to come, before they have a family of their own. Some appreciate learning from the parents' *Shabbos* table. Others want to develop their own style.

And sometimes parents push in the other direction. “Why are you coming over every *Shabbos*? You should be bonding!”

If this works for the couple, let them be. Perhaps they enjoy the walks to and from the meal together. Perhaps they appreciate not having to make their own meals for the time being. As long as having them over works for you too, why get stuck on how it should be?

Different arrangements can work. The attitude with which people make them also matters.

Setting the right tone

I remember being invited for a Friday-night meal when I was learning in *yeshivah*. The host's son-in-law was going too, and he would show me the way.

On the way, we met an older single who was troubled. He felt that the son-in-law had answered him disrespectfully. The son-in-law apologized, but the fellow continued berating him. To be honest, there was some truth in the complaint, though a more level-headed person would have said it differently and let it go.

He followed us, saying that he had been embarrassed and that *Hashem* would repay the *yungerman* for it. It was uncomfortable. As we approached the father-in-law's home, I thought, “This is going to become ugly.” Imagine arriving at your in-laws' house with someone behind you loudly describing what is wrong with you. But the son-in-law wasn't nervous.

We walked in, and the fellow came right behind us. He told the father-in-law what the son-in-law had done. The father-in-law heard him out and invited him to the meal. He stayed and continued talking about it.

What amazed me wasn't only the father-in-law's composure. It was how comfortable the son-in-law felt. He had walked into that home confidently, knowing that his father-in-law would take it well.

Those who create security and comfort in their homes give the relationship something to rely on even when a difficult situation arises. People can be themselves without feeling that every mistake will become another reason to find fault with them. That makes it easier to come, to share, and to remain close.

Part 3 - When things become difficult

Chapter 7

Keeping family disagreements from spreading

Even when there are disagreements, leave the children out of them. It becomes heavy and uncomfortable to be stuck between two sets of parents who don't get along, quite apart from what it can do to the couple's *shalom bayis*.

A parent wrote to me about something that had been difficult when they were a child. At the time, it seemed so simple: “When I marry off my own children, I'll know how to avoid this.” Now that the writer had reached that stage, it wasn't so simple anymore.

“Please, parents, try to keep a good relationship with your *mechutanim*, even if it means giving in a lot. You're not doing this for your *mechutanim*. You're really doing this for your child and their spouse.”

There are the ordinary things, like attending each other's *simchos*. Then there are more stressful situations, where you feel that the other side isn't being considerate. Sometimes the disagreement concerns the children or grandchildren, and only one side can have things its way. You can decide whether you want to win the argument or whether giving in would be a better accomplishment. Aside from the importance of peace, you're doing it for your children.

“But I'm not involving them. I just told my son what happened. He knows I'm right.” That can also be damaging. Apart from the issue of *lashon hara*, you may assume that your child, or even your child-in-law, will agree with you. It seems so obvious. Why should anyone be offended when you're describing what happened?

It isn't always as obvious to everyone else. Hearing criticism of one's parents or in-laws often puts a person on the defensive. One side isn't usually completely right. You describe your side, and now the child feels the need to explain the part where the other side has a point. Even if your child agrees, the spouse may not. What began between the parents has now become something between husband and wife.

Keep the children out of the disagreement

Don't make the children into messengers or use them to carry out your disagreement. “They didn't give you what they promised. How can you go to them for *Yom Tov*?” “Tell your in-laws that this arrangement won't work for you.”

Your children may have been comfortable with something until you began teaching them to stand up for themselves. You mean to help, and you have brought them into your conflict.

The reverse happens too. A couple has difficulties with one set of parents, and the other set gets drawn in to help. It may be admirable to want to make peace, but it is a delicate matter. Sometimes the wisest thing is to gently suggest an appropriate third party and then move on. It isn't in your control to make sure the relationship works out as you think it should.

This applies to disagreements in your own marriage too. When husband and wife aren't getting along, sometimes they begin sending messages through the children. “Tell Tatty that I took the money.” “Ask Mommy for the money.”

Children shouldn't be put in that position. And the fact that they are married now, and seem more capable of understanding and communicating, doesn't mean that involving them is harmless. You may be causing them considerable stress, and it may affect their own *shalom bayis* too.

If you need help with your marriage, find someone appropriate to help you. The fact that your children are there, care about you, and want to be helpful doesn't necessarily make them the right people. Sometimes even when a child offers, you need to know how to appreciate the concern without accepting an arrangement that won't be good for anyone.

There are exceptions where a child genuinely knows how to help. But don't assume that being older and married is enough.

What you pass on

There is also a question of what information we pass on. Telling a child that something must be kept from a spouse is generally stepping into private territory. If you think that sharing a particular piece of information might cause difficulty, you can suggest caution and appropriate guidance. Dictating that the child must keep it secret is another matter.

A spouse and in-laws aren't the same relationship. You shouldn't put them together as though the same approach to sharing applies to everyone. A young couple may need to learn which relationships are close and trusting and which require more caution. Once they are married, it is generally better not to take over those decisions.

And look at what you share in the first place. If you don't want something passed on, did it need to be told to the child at all?

I remember a story of a *rav* whose father-in-law entrusted him with private information. The next day, the father-in-law heard it being discussed in *shul*. “Didn't I tell you to keep it quiet?”

“Well, I learned from the *shver*,” the son-in-law answered. “You shared it because you couldn't keep it to yourself. I thought I could do the same.”

As soon as you speak, you have placed the information in someone else's hands. If you think passing it on will be unhelpful, sometimes the first place to exercise restraint is with what you say.

Showing respect yourself

I once met with a *Chassidishe Rebbe* about a couple who were struggling with *shalom bayis*. He felt that their difficulties hadn't been so great. They could have been dealt with, but then the parents got involved. Each set took a side, and the husband and wife began defending their respective parents.

An issue that could have remained between the couple became several conflicts, each feeding the others. I've seen this so many times. Each time, it's a tragedy.

Then the *Rebbe* told me something about his own approach. When he married off children, he gave honors under the *chuppah* to the *mechutanim* rather than to distinguished relatives who were themselves *rebbes* and *rabbanim*.

“I want my children to see how I revere their parents-in-law. That way, they will honor them too.”

Telling children to respect their in-laws is much less convincing than showing how you respect them yourself.

Caught in the middle

There is another situation that I hear about very often. A father is caught between his wife and their married children.

One father wrote that a daughter had stayed with them for a few weeks after giving birth. His wife offered advice, but she didn't simply offer an opinion and leave it there. If the daughter didn't follow it, she became hurt. “I see that nobody cares about me.”

The father felt that his wife was making the difficulty. He tried explaining why her approach wasn't helpful, and she became more upset. If he remained quiet, she was upset that he wasn't taking her side.

“How do I make her feel heard without getting pulled into the whole thing? And how do I build a closer relationship with my wife?”

People find themselves in this position between spouses and children, between siblings, between other relatives. Both people want you to understand them. Both want you on their side. You want to be good to everyone, and you become the person in the middle.

Often it doesn't help. You become drained, and now both are upset with you. Sometimes the two people even make up, and the person who tried to help is left with the difficulty.

Part of this can come from feeling responsible for everyone's happiness. “How can I hold back if I see that someone is upset?” But you never undertook to make everyone happy all the time. You cannot take responsibility for making sure that one person never upsets another. First understand what is actually yours to do.

There are people who can help effectively, and there are situations where intervention is necessary. Actual abuse or neglect, especially involving dependent children, is a different discussion and needs to be considered seriously. Don't confuse it with the ordinary disagreements we're discussing here.

Speak separately

If you've tried joining the argument and tried remaining quiet, and neither helped, perhaps stop trying to handle both people together. Speak separately.

Aharon HaKohen, who loved and pursued peace, knew what each person needed to hear. He went to one and then the other, bringing them closer. He wasn't looking to sit everyone down and establish who was guilty.

When you speak to your wife privately, really hear her. Why do I emphasize that? Because you already think she is at fault. Whether you've said it or not, she probably feels it. It takes more effort to let her feel that you are listening.

And you can understand her. A mother feels that her children don't take her seriously. That hurts. You don't have to argue a feeling away.

I'm not saying that the daughters must do everything their mother suggests. I'm not saying that the way she says it is right. But the hurt deserves to be heard. Understanding it doesn't mean that now you must shout at the children.

First listen. Perhaps that is what she needs. Perhaps once she feels heard, she will be calmer and notice for herself that insisting isn't accomplishing much. You don't have to begin by explaining why she is wrong. You already know that isn't working.

If she then asks you to take a particular action, you can discuss whether it would help. “I'm not sure that saying this will improve things. I'd like to ask someone before I do it.” That is different from making the whole conversation about her mistakes.

Understanding doesn't mean agreeing to act

Think of a child who comes home upset with a teacher or principal. Sometimes the father feels that there are only two choices. Either agree with the child and now have to call the principal, or tell the child that the principal is right and he is wrong.

But who says these are the only two choices? You can hear what happened and understand why the child is hurt. That doesn't mean you have already agreed to make the telephone call.

“Call him!” “Let's hear a little more about what happened. I'll think about whether calling will help. Perhaps I'll ask someone whether there is a better approach.”

This example concerns ordinary disagreements. A report of abuse, bullying, or danger needs prompt attention and appropriate action; it shouldn't be set aside as just another complaint.

You aren't dismissing the hurt. You are considering the practical next step separately.

Sometimes a husband and wife become caught in an argument about why a child is struggling or why the married couple conduct themselves a certain way. One parent feels that something needs to be said, and the other disagrees. Soon they are arguing about everything that happened before.

You may feel that if you acknowledge your spouse's point, you will also have to agree to the action being proposed. But those are separate questions. You can say, “You're right. That wasn't handled well,” or, “I agree that they shouldn't be doing that,” and still ask whether saying something now will help.

You don't have to defend an old mistake in order to question the next step. “I understand what you're saying. What I don't know is whether speaking to them will accomplish what we want. Let's ask someone who can help us decide.” That keeps the discussion on what can be done for the child now, rather than on proving who was right all along.

The same distinction can help when your wife wants you to intervene with the married children. You can understand what bothers her without deciding, during that conversation, that you must now confront someone.

Of course, use judgment. Agreeing with every complaint can sometimes make the person angrier and more convinced of their grievance. We're speaking about a calm conversation, away from the argument, where someone can feel understood rather than encouraged to fight. If you aren't sure how to manage that distinction, ask someone who can help you understand the situation.

Being on the same page

Sometimes one parent says, “If you would back me up, the child would listen.” That may be true. When one parent asks for something reasonable and the other keeps undoing it, the different messages can make things harder.

But sometimes the other parent is doing something the child needs. “If I were as strict with him as you are, he wouldn't want to come here at all. He still comes because he knows that I understand him.” That can also be true. You can't settle the question simply by saying that parents have to be united.

You need to understand what is happening with this child and what each parent's approach is accomplishing. Is one undermining something helpful, or providing warmth and reassurance that would otherwise be missing? Get guidance about the actual situation rather than insisting that the answer must always be for both parents to do the same thing.

And if you are the married child watching this happen with a sibling, it isn't your place to take over and tell your parents how to handle it. You can seek guidance about your own part without becoming responsible for directing theirs.

What needs to be passed along? Sometimes a parent gives you a message for your spouse. “Tell your wife that next time she should come earlier.” Or your spouse makes a remark about your mother, and you feel that you have to repeat it. Before carrying the words from one person to the other, ask what that will accomplish.

There may be something practical that needs to be communicated. But sometimes you already know that repeating the criticism will only hurt, create resentment, and accomplish nothing. You don't have to pass along every complaint simply because you heard it. If something does need to be discussed, think about how to give it over without carrying all the irritation along with it.

The same applies when explaining your own decisions. “We aren't coming because my wife doesn't want to” can leave your parents blaming her. You can say, “This time we'll be eating at home,” without making your spouse the reason they didn't get what they wanted. Be careful not to create a disagreement between people who weren't even speaking to each other.

Speak to the children too

Then speak to the children separately too. Listen to them. You aren't beginning another campaign to educate a married daughter. You can offer a suggestion.

“When Mommy says something, perhaps you can thank her and say that you'll discuss it with your husband. Sometimes it may be worth going along with something that isn't difficult for you. I know her words can sound strong. She doesn't mean to sound so angry.”

Sometimes you can help by giving each side a good word from the other. Let your daughter hear that her father appreciates her husband. Let your husband hear that the children look up to

him. People can become so caught in what bothers them that they no longer notice the good feelings that are there too.

And when there is something good to pass along, don't be so stingy with it. Some people are so concerned about repeating the exact words that the compliment hardly comes across. Someone said something warm and appreciative, and by the time they give it over, it sounds like almost nothing. Why not give the good word generously? Let the other person feel the appreciation.

Sometimes, for the sake of peace, there is room to lay it on a little thicker. Something was said once or twice; you give the impression that it comes up more often. The compliment concerned one particular thing; you convey a broader feeling of appreciation. Don't become so caught in exactly how much was said that you lose an opportunity to bring people closer.

We know the example of *Aharon HaKohen*, who brought people closer by telling each one that the other wanted to make peace. It isn't always necessary to repeat exactly what was said, with every unpleasant detail intact.

But this needs a great deal of care. It isn't permission to say whatever will get the result you want, or to cover up a serious problem. You need to understand the people involved and consider what your words may bring about. Where you aren't sure what is appropriate, ask for guidance.

The purpose is to make it easier for people to see good in one another and come closer. A generously given good word can sometimes accomplish much more than another discussion about who was wrong.

More than this disagreement

Meanwhile, don't let this one difficulty become the whole relationship with your wife. If all she feels from you is that you understand the children and notice her mistakes, how is closeness supposed to develop?

You can appreciate her. You can let her know that you need her, that you notice what she does, and that you are impressed by her devotion. Even in this situation, you may see something to appreciate: she offered advice, it wasn't accepted, and she still continues doing so much for the children.

When people speak about emotional closeness, sometimes it becomes a demand for a particular feeling. “You have to make me feel close. You have to give me that feeling.”

What exactly is being asked for? If someone doesn't feel it, does that prove that the other person hasn't given anything? It is easier to discuss a concrete request that both people can understand.

But you can certainly do things that help your wife feel special and appreciated. That is different from constantly being the person who knows how she should have spoken to the children. There is more to her, and more to your relationship, than this disagreement. You don't have to solve the entire disagreement before you can build a good relationship with her.

And you don't have to solve it this minute. Patience isn't ignoring the difficulty. It also isn't only speaking in a quiet voice. Patience concerns what you expect your words to accomplish. You can listen, say something helpful, and give it time. Sometimes the right words have an effect later. Find what may help, without insisting that everyone must immediately become satisfied.

Chapter 8

Repairing hurt and distance

It is very painful to want a relationship with your children and not be able to have it. A mother wrote to me about losing the relationship she had with her son and daughter-in-law. They had been close and spent many *Shabbosos* together. Then her daughter-in-law was diagnosed with a medical condition. The mother was distraught. She told people and asked them to say *Tehillim*. Her daughter-in-law was furious because she had wanted to keep it private.

“I apologized many times, wholeheartedly, for a few years already,” the mother wrote. But her daughter-in-law said that she would be polite but didn't want a relationship. The connection with the son had suffered too. The mother understood that the family was going through a great deal. She continued *davening* for her daughter-in-law's recovery. But she was heartbroken over the distance, and she wanted encouragement.

I don't know this daughter-in-law or this son. I don't know how much of their reaction comes from the particular difficulty they are experiencing. I can't decide the whole situation from a letter.

In the mother's account, she wanted people to pray for her daughter-in-law. That doesn't mean disclosing the information was right. Does meaning well allow a person to hurt someone unintentionally? No. But there is a difference between doing something to hurt and doing something that hurts while trying to help. When the person is asking forgiveness, that difference is also worth considering.

I don't know more of this family's story than what was written. And it isn't easy for either side: for someone dealing with a diagnosis, or for the parent who feels the relationship slipping away.

There are people who are naturally hard to get along with. There are also people who aren't generally so difficult, but circumstances bring out difficulties. Someone going through a serious challenge can become so emotionally overwhelmed that a logical explanation doesn't get through.

“When I say this, why do they say that? When I do this, why do they blame me for something else?” Sometimes the reaction won't make sense to you. Instead of continuing to explain, you have to consider what might reach the person emotionally.

Have you tried everything?

Before deciding that nothing can be done, make sure that you aren't reaching that conclusion too quickly. I'm not saying that this mother did that. But people sometimes hear such a discussion and immediately apply it to themselves. “I've already done everything. I said I'm sorry. I tried. From now on, there's nothing more for me to do.”

Then you ask, “Did you try this?” “That doesn't make sense.” “Did you actually apologize?” “Why would I apologize? I don't have to apologize. I said I'm willing to turn the page.”

Perhaps there is still quite a lot to do. Perhaps if the person were willing to hear another approach, the relationship wouldn't look so impossible.

Trying the apology again

One possibility is to look again at the apology. You may have apologized many times, and you may have done it properly. I don't know. But sometimes people put the justification into every apology.

“I'm sorry I did that. I really didn't mean anything. I didn't think you would take it so badly. Most people wouldn't have a problem with it, so I'm not sure what bothered you. But I'm sorry.”

There are people who apologize that way. Others say, “I'm sorry that you were hurt by what I did.” The apology may not be received well, not because the other person refuses to forgive, but because the words aren't what they need to hear.

“What do you mean? I have to say it the way you want? I have to say that I did the wrong thing? I don't think I did the wrong thing.”

You don't have to. But if you're asking what might help a situation that has gone on for years, it is something to consider. Perhaps the apology hasn't reached them in the way you thought it had. Perhaps it is worth trying again.

Sometimes you realize that something you said may have hurt your child, but you wait to see whether anything will be said about it. Consider bringing it up yourself. “I've been thinking about what I said yesterday. I didn't realize how it would sound, and I feel bad. I'm sorry.”

You can explain that you didn't intend to hurt without using that explanation to dismiss what happened. There is a difference between, “I didn't mean it, so why are you upset?” and, “I didn't mean to hurt you, but I understand that it hurt.”

When the other person has to begin by telling you what you did wrong, it is easy to become defensive. Sometimes acknowledging it first makes it much easier for them to accept the apology. And even if they hadn't planned to mention it, they now know that you noticed and cared.

Let them feel what you mean

Sometimes the complaint is, “You don't love me. You don't care about me.” The parent can't understand it. “After everything I've done? How can my child possibly think that?” You want to explain. You want to go through what happened and show why the child's interpretation is wrong.

A parent once wrote to me about a daughter whose husband, in the parent's account, wasn't treating her well. The parent had also begun hearing complaints from the daughter that her parents didn't love her and treated her differently from the other children.

The father felt that his son-in-law had convinced her of this. They had always been close to their daughter, he wrote, and the complaints had no basis. What could they do?

When someone already feels hurt and misunderstood, arguing about your intentions often brings another argument. “I wanted to come for *Shabbos*, and you told me not to.” You explain that you thought someone else was coming, or that there was another reason.

Sometimes there really is a simple misunderstanding that can be cleared up. But often the person can interpret the same facts differently, and now you are arguing about what those facts prove.

The point isn't only to convince your daughter that she has no reason to think you don't love her. Do what you can so that she feels loved. Invite her for another meal. Offer practical help. Give her warmth and attention in a way that reaches her.

“But it's ridiculous that she thinks this.” Perhaps. Still, what can you do to help her feel differently?

I often repeat a story about the Belzer *Rav*. People had reported that a butcher was selling *treif* meat. When the *Rav* spoke to him, the butcher protested that it wasn't true. People might think so, he said, but he wasn't doing it.

The *Rav* expressed relief. As the butcher was leaving, he called him back and told him to make sure that from now on, nobody should think so.

That is something to consider in a relationship too. “My child thinks I don't love her.” Don't only argue that she is mistaken. See what you can do so that she shouldn't think so.

In that father's situation, there was another place to put effort: the relationship with the son-in-law. Without deciding that the parents had caused his conduct, or that showing acceptance would solve every problem, I suggested helping him feel accepted too.

Let him feel that you are pleased to have him in the family and appreciate him. That is something you can work on from your side, even when there are other difficulties you cannot resolve yourself.

What would it take?

Another possibility, if you're open to it, is asking, “What would it take for you to forgive me and have a relationship with me?”

I'm offering an option, not saying that you have to agree to whatever someone demands. Committing in advance to the other person's terms wouldn't be responsible. But hearing what they have in mind is another matter. Sometimes the person may reconsider when they see that you are willing to discuss doing things differently, and sometimes what they ask for may be worthwhile.

You can also consider asking an appropriate person to help bring you together. Someone may be able to ask, “Your mother-in-law really wants to make this work. What could help?” Or the person may simply carry a good message: she cares about you, thinks about you, and spoke nicely about you.

You don't always know which person, at which time, may help bring people closer.

What the other person sees

There is an exercise I often use when speaking to people. I ask them, “What is your wife seeing? What are your parents seeing?”

Usually it isn't easy for them to say it. Even in the privacy of my office, they begin describing the other side and immediately explain why it is wrong. “She would say that I'm always late, but it's completely untrue.” “They would say that I'm not respectful, but that's only because they have crazy ideas about the respect they deserve.”

I only asked you to say it. Nothing more. Say what they would say. Think about what they see. They don't have to be right for you to acknowledge their perspective.

Sometimes that is where you begin to understand. “Oh, if that's what they see, then even though I disagree, I can understand why they react that way.” Now you may have a better idea of what could be done differently.

I remember *mechutanim* who had fought over a decision concerning their married children. The decision was already made, and time had passed, but they felt they couldn't make peace without going to a *rav*.

“What are you hoping the *rav* will do?” I asked. “We want him to hear both sides and say who was right. We can't move on without settling that.”

The children had made their decision. What was left to accomplish by winning the argument? Getting stuck on a point that no longer changes anything can keep people apart when they could already begin making peace.

Sometimes we are waiting for the other person to acknowledge our position before we allow the relationship to continue. It is worth considering what that insistence is accomplishing.

Making room for change

Don't assume that a relationship cannot improve simply because it wasn't close before. Someone once wrote that children and parents don't become close for the first time in adult life. I don't agree.

Many relationships thrive once children grow up and leave home. The pressures of childrearing and living together change. There can be room for a parent-child relationship to develop in a way that wasn't possible before.

A parent who had been learning how to understand children and give them what they needed left a message describing a remarkable change. The child was already twenty and married. The relationship hadn't been good while he was at home, and after he left it had become worse. But as the parents learned how to give him the love he needed, things changed so dramatically that the parent could hardly believe it.

A change in circumstances can bring emotional distance, or it can make people more comfortable and bring them closer. Learning the new patterns and opportunities may allow you to accomplish something you couldn't accomplish previously.

Change doesn't always happen immediately. There isn't an instant recipe. Someone may not respond as you hoped right away. That alone doesn't mean that the effort has no value.

And this isn't only about children withdrawing from parents. Parents sometimes withdraw from children. “If you don't do what I want, I'm not going to speak to you.” A person is hurt and takes a position. Later it becomes difficult to climb down and say, “Let's get along.” Meanwhile, the distance is painful to everyone.

I don't want to judge someone who has reached a point where they feel that they cannot have a relationship. There are situations where a person had no choice, and these matters need a *Torah* approach and responsible guidance. But don't assume that remaining apart has solved everything. Get help. Speak to someone. Look for what might still be possible.

You don't have to be together every *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*. You may not be able to share every private matter. If a particular kind of information can't be shared, perhaps leave that information out and preserve what can be shared.

“I can't have the relationship I want, so I can't have a relationship at all” is another extreme. A connection doesn't have to contain everything to contain something worthwhile.

The part that is yours

At the same time, you may have apologized properly, explored ways to reconcile, involved suitable people, and still made no progress. There are limits to what one person can accomplish with another. Sometimes there really isn't another practical step available to you.

There is a difference between deciding too quickly that you have done everything and honestly recognizing that you cannot make the other person respond. It is worth asking for help to understand where you are, rather than deciding only from your own frustration.

And even when there is something to do, keep turning to *Hashem*. Sometimes people use *bitachon* as a reason not to take the steps that are available.

“I can't get along with my sister. I keep asking *Hashem* to help.” “Did you try being nice to her?” “I'm waiting for *Hashem*.” “Did you apologize for what upset her?” “I'm only talking to *Hashem*.”

If you're only talking to *Hashem* while avoiding what you can do, the difficulty may remain. But if you're also talking to *Hashem*, and doing what you can, or you have genuinely reached the end of what you can do, that is something else. Making the appropriate effort and turning to *Hashem* belong together.

Chapter 9

When you cannot make it all work

“How can I be happy when I have this heartache weighing on me all the time?” The mother whose relationship with her son and daughter-in-law had become distant wasn't only asking how to repair it. She also wanted to know how to live with the pain while it remained unresolved.

It isn't easy. I am, *Baruch Hashem*, not in that situation. I can only imagine the pain. For me to begin giving someone ideas about how to be happy while going through that sounds a little ridiculous.

There is something to understand here about what we can do and what we cannot do. You are limited in how you can affect another person. You are limited in how you can connect with another person. Sometimes, when there is nothing more to do, you have to recognize that there is nothing more to do. It isn't a pleasant realization. Sometimes it is the reality.

We have to be careful not to decide that too quickly. Sometimes there is a great deal we could do, and it is good to ask. But there are also situations where we have no further answer.

When there is nothing more to do

A person always needs *bitachon*. Even while making an effort, we rely on *Hashem*. If there is something appropriate to do, we have to do it. We cannot simply say, “I rely on *Hashem*.”

But sometimes you don't know how to get out of the situation. There isn't another practical step available. Then you turn to *Hashem*: “*Hashem*, there is nothing I can do. Please help me.”

That also has a place. First find out whether there is something you can do. If there isn't, you don't have to keep inventing another way to control what is beyond you.

Accepting reality

People sometimes hold on to the hope that a relationship will become exactly what they want. They feel that without that hope, nothing would remain. But accepting a reality isn't necessarily hopelessness. It can mean being honest about what is reasonable.

Sometimes a relationship can remain civil and respectful without becoming as close as you hoped. You may enjoy what is there more once you stop continually trying for more and ending up with less. Interestingly, that acceptance itself sometimes allows a relationship to improve.

Sometimes the relationship is respectful and pleasant, but it isn't as warm or expressive as you see in another family. You wish your son would drop in more often, have more to say, or seem more excited to spend time together. It is worth considering whether something needs attention or whether you are hoping for a kind of relationship that doesn't come naturally to the people involved.

An older man once spoke to me about wanting more closeness with his married son. As we spoke, it emerged that his own father had wanted the same thing from him. He had respected his father, but their relationship hadn't been especially close. He felt more comfortable discussing things with his mentor. Now he was disappointed to find something similar with his own son.

You can learn how to make the relationship warmer and more inviting. But if there is respect, goodwill, and no particular difficulty between you, don't assume that it is a problem because it doesn't look like someone else's relationship. Perhaps what you have is good, even if it is quieter than you imagined.

What is yours to take responsibility for?

This is something I discussed with a daughter-in-law who was trying very hard to please her in-laws. She had even apologized for not being worthy of their son. She wanted to know what more she could do.

I told her that I wasn't sure she needed to take more responsibility. Taking responsibility is generally mature, but it can be overdone. You can't please everyone all the time. Once you've done what is yours to do, you aren't obligated to make everything work.

Someone in a very difficult relationship once told me, “I think the only way to make this work is to be a *Chafetz Chaim* and tolerate everything.”

While I'm sure the *Chafetz Chaim* would do a wonderful job in any relationship, simply tolerating everything can sometimes enable more dysfunction or abuse. Taking more on yourself may make the dynamics worse rather than better.

That is a sensitive point. It needs to be understood and applied properly, with appropriate guidance. It doesn't mean there is no possible way forward. It means that more effort isn't automatically the right effort.

Sometimes a person feels that making everyone happy is his responsibility. If someone is upset, he has to fix it. If two people aren't getting along, he has to find the words that will make them get along.

Who said that you undertook to make everyone happy all the time? Who said that you can? You can take responsibility for yourself. First understand what is actually yours to do.

There are people who can help a great deal, and it is a good thing when they do. But if you see that you cannot accomplish what you're trying to accomplish, you have to recognize that. Someone else's demand that you solve it doesn't, by itself, make it your responsibility.

Sometimes that clarity alone helps a person become calmer. You can consider what to say without becoming entirely overwhelmed by what the other person wants from you.

Parents also need to understand that their efforts don't give them control over how the other person receives them. You can try to be the best parent, brother, neighbor, or spouse. The relationship still depends on what the other person sees in what you do.

I've heard from parents who try to be careful, and the child is upset that they didn't say something. Another time they do say something, and the child is upset that they interfered. Sometimes they speak only when asked, and it still isn't received well.

You can be cautious. You can try your best. You cannot guarantee the response.

There is another expectation to watch for. Sometimes you are prepared to go beyond what is comfortable for you, and you feel that the other person should do the same. But your willingness doesn't determine what someone else can manage.

Parents may offer to host the whole family for the *Seder*, even though it will take tremendous effort. That doesn't necessarily mean that their married children, who have large families and perhaps married children of their own, can accept the invitation. Or you arrange an out-of-town celebration around your parents' schedule and then feel hurt that they still aren't making the trip. Their availability wasn't necessarily the only difficulty.

You can appreciate someone's effort without being able to do what they hoped. And when you are the one making the effort, remember to consider the other person's circumstances too.

Knowing and feeling

So what about the mother's question? How can she be happy? The general perspective is to try to accept with love, knowing that this comes from *Hashem*. It doesn't make it easy. But it gives us a perspective to return to: *Hashem* is running the world, creating it every minute, and doing everything for our benefit.

Remembering that doesn't necessarily mean you feel happy right away. You may not feel it at all. Many people want to feel a certain way, and we don't always get the feelings we want. But we can influence our thoughts and the perspective we keep returning to.

There is a difference between knowing and feeling. You can know that this is from *Hashem* and for the good while still feeling the pain.

Between you and *Hashem*

A relationship isn't only between you and the other person. *Hashem* is involved too.

When we wrong another person, we know that we have to seek that person's forgiveness. But even after receiving forgiveness, there is still *teshuvah* toward *Hashem* for having done something He told us not to do.

You hurt someone. You stole from someone. You need to address what happened with that person, and you also need to address the wrongdoing with *Hashem*.

The same understanding matters when you are the one being hurt. The other person's responsibility doesn't disappear. They shouldn't hurt you. But *Hashem* is involved in what you are going through, and you can turn to Him.

Sometimes the pain makes a person want to fight harder. “I'm hurt, so I'll make sure you can't do this to me. I'll hurt you back.” There is also a way of taking that brokenness and turning to *Hashem* with it.

You can do your best, think well of the other person, send good messages, and hope that something comes back. Even when it doesn't, what you are going through remains from *Hashem*.

Not everything happens immediately

You don't have to work everything out immediately. Sometimes the right words have an effect later. Patience includes what you expect from your efforts, not only the tone in which you speak.

“*Divrei chachamim b'nachas nishma'im*”—the words of the wise are heard when spoken gently. That gentleness also includes patience about what you want the words to accomplish. When you feel that you must settle everything on the spot, win the argument, find the right wording, and make the other person respond now, you become frustrated when it doesn't happen.

You can look for words that may have a good influence without demanding the result this minute. If not today, perhaps later. You don't have to give up simply because the words weren't immediately followed by what you hoped to see.

There may still be something to do, and then you want to do it. There may be something to learn, and then you want to hear it. But when you have reached what you can do, you can put the rest before *Hashem*. You aren't able to carry both sides of a relationship on your own.

Part 4

To the Married Child

Chapter 10

Building your marriage while honoring your parents

“I've married now. What does my father have to tell me? Why should I ask him? Why should I take his opinion into account?” Sometimes that is what people take from hearing that parents should give married children their space.

I've seen this happen with other subjects too. A person hears that his spouse shouldn't control him. The next time she asks him to pick up a package, he says, “I'm not your servant.” What happened? Can't people do things for one another? Can't they take one another into account? He learned a word, and now he's afraid of everything that might fit under it.

The same confusion can enter this relationship. You hear about independence, and suddenly asking your father an opinion seems like something to avoid.

You can still have something to learn

If you appreciate your father's wisdom, if you understand that he is older and has experience, if you want to hear from him, wonderful. You can be twenty-two and still have plenty to learn. There is nothing wrong with that.

Someone once told a person who was trying to help him, “There's nothing you can teach me. I know it all already.” Do you realize what a shortcoming that is? A person who wants to learn is prepared to ask.

Perhaps this is the first time you're dealing with a particular difficulty, and someone else has experience with it. Or perhaps this is the tenth time, and the fact that it keeps coming back is itself a reason to ask whether there is something you haven't understood.

There are people who can't receive guidance from their parents. Sometimes it is the way the parent speaks. Sometimes the child finds it too difficult emotionally. Sometimes it affects the marriage, and the person has sought guidance about what to do.

But none of that removes the obligation to honor parents. Nor does being able to make your own decisions mean that you necessarily know how to make every decision well.

When you hear advice addressed to parents, remember that it doesn't decide what you should do. Perhaps your mother shouldn't comment on how you speak to your wife. Perhaps your father should remain quiet. That doesn't mean that the conduct they noticed is right.

A parent asks about a son who leaves his wife waiting or hardly greets her when he comes home. Even if the right advice for the parent is not to say anything, the *yungerman* who hears the question can consider, “Perhaps I do that too. Perhaps I haven't thought about how it feels.”

The same applies to a wife. A parent may not be the person to correct it, but she can still think about whether she is giving her husband the consideration he deserves. Each side has its own guidance. One doesn't cancel the other.

Don't take a discussion about parental involvement and turn it into, “My father doesn't know what he's talking about. He should hear this *shiur*.” Perhaps you would benefit from asking him a question and hearing his answer. Being willing to learn isn't giving up your own home.

Your own home

One married reader described a different difficulty. “When a child marries, they're marrying someone from another family. My spouse doesn't necessarily have the same priorities, values, and customs that my parents emphasized. How can I soften the blow when they see that we're doing things differently?”

It is normal that you married someone who is different and that your home won't be exactly what your parents would have chosen. Your home needs to be peaceful and respectful. You cannot please everyone all the time. Trying to do that can leave you stuck between two places.

A married woman's first allegiance is to her husband. When that isn't clear, it can cause unnecessary marital strife as well as hurt between parents and children. And putting your husband first isn't something he should have to enforce.

A man will also often be guided by *da'as Torah* that considering his spouse and his own home comes before pleasing his parents. The details and applications need proper *Torah* guidance.

But people sometimes run from that to the other extreme. “If I can't please my parents anyway, if they don't approve, then what's the point of trying? I'll do whatever I want.”

Why? There are so many ways to be considerate and respectful even if you cannot accomplish everything. Sometimes being more considerate in their presence isn't so difficult. If there is something you can do without harming your own home, why resist it?

The fact that certain aspects of the obligation change after marriage doesn't mean that nothing remains. You have to fulfill the *mitzvah* to the degree that you can.

A woman once wrote to me that her father often asked her to help him. She felt guilty if she didn't respond immediately, and this had caused arguments with her husband. She had received help with those feelings, but the practical difficulty kept recurring.

It is good to receive help sorting out emotions and handling challenges. But any advice, whether in therapy or anywhere else, has to be in line with *Torah*. We don't decide what our obligations are simply from what makes us feel less guilty.

Where there is no conflict between her obligations, a married woman still has the obligation to honor her parents. A *rav* should help clarify the details. Once the *Torah* guidance is clear, other forms of help can make it easier to do what is right with confidence and less guilt.

Every person and couple should have a *rav* to turn to with questions, including sensitive questions about relationships.

Sometimes your parents notice something that really does need attention. You may feel that they are getting involved where they shouldn't, and perhaps their way of approaching it isn't helpful. But that doesn't by itself mean that the concern is mistaken.

Especially if they are worried about how you are being treated, don't dismiss everything with, “It's my marriage.” You don't have to let your parents direct your home, but you can bring what they are saying to someone trustworthy who can help you assess it. Sometimes a person outside the marriage sees something that the person living with it hasn't fully recognized.

And when you ask, give over the actual concern, not only how upset you are that your parents mentioned it. You want help understanding whether something is wrong and what should be done, rather than only reassurance that your parents shouldn't interfere.

Honoring parents does not disappear

Kibbud av va'eim isn't a subject only for children in *cheder*. It is one of the Ten Commandments. A *yungerman* who has reached adulthood and is establishing himself should understand its importance more, not less.

“My father is sharp. He doesn't understand. He isn't from today's generation.” You still have an obligation to honor him. Learn the *halachos*. Ask your *rav* what applies in the circumstances. Don't assume that because your parent shouldn't have said something, the way you answer no longer matters.

It is natural to want your parents to think well of you. You look up to them, and their approval means something to you. That isn't necessarily a weakness you need to overcome. Sometimes wanting to please them helps you remain careful about things that deserve care.

The question is what that desire is leading you to do. Are your parents encouraging something good for you and your family, even if you would rather not hear it? Or are you making a choice you don't believe is right because you can't bear their disappointment? Those are different situations.

Don't assume that every wish for approval is unhealthy, or that becoming independent means no longer caring what your parents think. But don't let the need for approval take the place of understanding what is right. That is something to clarify honestly, with guidance where needed.

I once asked a friend to come to my home before *Shabbos* to help with something. We arranged a time. I called him, and he didn't answer. I tried again. This was a reliable, gentle person, and I couldn't understand what had happened.

When I arrived home, he was sitting in his car outside. I knocked on the window. “You see me calling. Why aren't you answering?” He pointed to the car's speaker. “My father.”

He had been sitting there for three quarters of an hour while his father spoke. He was there as arranged, but his father was talking, and he wasn't interrupting to take another call.

There was something to learn from the way he took speaking with his father seriously. The discussion about parents giving grown children space doesn't make the *mitzvah* of honoring parents disappear.

Sometimes the difficulty isn't whether you should help your parents, but when and how. Before deciding that your spouse doesn't want you to be there for them, discuss what would work. “I'd like to visit my father. When would be a good time?” “My mother needs some help. What do we need to arrange here so that I can go?”

That gives your spouse a place in the decision. You are taking seriously what is happening in your own home while looking for a way to help your parents. Sometimes a different time or a small change in the arrangements makes both possible.

And afterward, acknowledge the help. “I'm glad you suggested going then. It worked out well.” Or, “Thank you for taking care of things here so that I could go.” Let your spouse feel that helping you care for your parents is something you notice and appreciate.

What are you being asked to provide?

A man wrote that his mother-in-law wanted his wife to attend therapy with her. It was expensive, and when his wife felt that she didn't need to go, her mother became very upset. There were several questions there, not only one. Would going together be helpful? What was the daughter being asked to do? And who was expected to pay?

The same *Torah* that requires us to honor our parents also defines what that obligation includes. A parent's request doesn't by itself mean that every expense becomes the child's responsibility. There are *halachos* about these matters, and you need to ask how they apply to your situation.

Don't assume that being a good child means agreeing to everything and paying for everything. But don't assume that a limit on what you must provide removes the need to respond

respectfully. You can clarify what is required of you while continuing to show your parent consideration and care.

Why not give your father pleasure?

There is also gratitude. Your parents brought you to where you are. As you get older, and especially when you begin marrying off children yourself, you may understand more of what that involved.

The relationship with parents isn't simply the same as another relationship in which each side gives an equal amount. When children are young, parents nurture them without receiving something equivalent in return. Appreciation for that doesn't end when the child marries.

Sometimes your parents do something for your children, and you think that once the children have thanked them, the appreciation has been expressed. But you benefited too. They took the children out, gave them a wonderful afternoon, and made your day easier. Let them hear that from you. “The children had such a good time, and it was a tremendous help to me too.”

It goes in the other direction as well. If grandparents helped pay for a celebration, the children can thank them for their part in it. The money may have been given to the parents, but the *bar mitzvah* boy or the *chosson* and *kallah* benefited from it. Notice what was given and who gained from it, rather than assuming that someone else's thank-you has covered everything.

A son-in-law wrote that his in-laws had financially supported almost all their children at the beginning of their marriages. Yet the children still felt unsupported. He described small opportunities to show care, such as acknowledging a child's or child-in-law's birthday. Those opportunities were missed, while the parents' own birthdays came with repeated reminders and expectations.

There were also old, unfulfilled promises. The children acknowledged that it was up to the parents how to spend their money, time, and effort. Still, they wanted to feel that they mattered and were a priority in their parents' lives. But appreciation for what was given still has a place, even when you feel disappointed by what came afterward.

That doesn't answer every question about what a parent may demand. You need *da'as Torah* about your obligations and what can be done without harming your responsibilities to your spouse and children. But don't make gratitude depend entirely on whether you are pleased with the relationship today.

I ask married men, “Are there things you know your father likes?” “Yes.” “Do you do them?” “I don't have to.”

I didn't ask whether you have to. Why not give your father pleasure? Why not share something, ask an opinion, let him feel that he is still your father even though you're thirty and have children of your own?

I've heard from fathers whose sons *daven* in the same *shul*, sometimes only a few rows away, but don't come over afterward to say *Good Shabbos*. The son may explain that his father pressures him and that he needs some space. Perhaps there really are things that need to change. But what does coming over to say *Good Shabbos* take away from your home? You aren't being asked to give up a week of your time. You're showing your father that you noticed him and wanted to greet him.

There are demands that interfere with your responsibilities at home, and those need proper guidance. But don't put every small opportunity to show respect into that same discussion. The fact that you can't do everything your parents want doesn't mean that you shouldn't look for the things you can gladly do.

When you make an effort to respect and appreciate your parents, the few areas where you cannot please them can become smaller parts of the relationship. You can ask their advice, care for them, and spend time together.

Sometimes the insistence on one particular decision reflects something emotional underneath. There may be other ways to help them feel valued.

Your own wishes matter too

Sometimes the discussion becomes entirely about what your parents want and what your spouse wants, and you leave yourself out. But perhaps you also enjoy having your parents over. You want that connection. That matters too. It isn't only a question of pleasing them instead of pleasing your spouse.

You can say, “I enjoy spending time with my parents, and I'd like us to find an arrangement that works.” Your spouse's discomfort deserves consideration, but it doesn't automatically mean that your own wish has to disappear. Nor does caring about your spouse mean that you can make every uncomfortable feeling go away.

At the same time, you are inviting people into a home that belongs to both of you. You can't simply decide on visits that impose on your spouse and say, “This is what I want.” Discuss the arrangements together. The time, the notice, and what hosting involves may all make a difference. Take your spouse seriously while also being clear about what is important to you.

What works for your marriage

Meanwhile, build the connection with your spouse. It isn't enough to do things together while all your decisions and discussions keep going through your parents. Speak to one another. Consider what the other person thinks.

A woman wrote that her husband was the youngest child. After their marriage, his parents pressured them to come for *Shabbos* almost every week so they wouldn't be alone. When the couple wanted to stay home, they were made to feel guilty.

At the time, she was studying and working full time, so not having to prepare for *Shabbos* was helpful. Looking back, though, she felt that they had needed more time to establish their own home and build their marriage.

“I wish my in-laws would have known that,” she wrote. She wished they had encouraged the couple to build their own lives, even though it was difficult for the parents.

Don't decide that there is only one proper arrangement for early marriage. Some couples appreciate being home together for *Shabbos*. Others enjoy meals with their parents. They can bond on the walk there and back, and they appreciate not having to prepare everything themselves. Some learn from watching their parents conduct a meal; others want to establish their own style.

What works for you and your spouse matters. Doing something only because “that's how it should be” can itself become a difficulty.

Will it settle with time?

Sometimes a newly married person is still very attached to the home in which he grew up. It takes time to become comfortable with a spouse and build a life together. That doesn't necessarily mean that something is wrong. There are difficulties that are common at the beginning and gradually settle as the couple becomes closer.

But there are also things that become harder because nobody addresses them. You can react too quickly and turn an adjustment into a bigger problem. You can also keep telling yourself that it will pass while the same pattern becomes more established. If you're concerned, discuss the actual situation with someone who understands these things. Is this something that needs time, or something that needs attention?

The same applies when a couple is waiting for children. That can bring particular challenges, but don't assume that every difficulty between you comes from that circumstance or will disappear when you have children. Sometimes it is connected, and sometimes it isn't. You want to understand what is happening rather than keep waiting for something else to resolve it.

Feeling comfortable with your parents

Sometimes a husband wants his wife to feel as comfortable with his parents as he does. Why doesn't she ask his mother herself? Why doesn't she go into the kitchen and help? Why is she sitting quietly instead of making conversation? He wants everyone to get along, but the pressure makes the visit less comfortable for her.

A woman wrote that she had been hungry when they arrived at her in-laws before a holiday. She asked her husband whether he could find something for her to eat. He was bothered that she hadn't simply opened the oven or asked his mother. Later, she was quietly enjoying the meal,

but he wanted her to talk more. She hadn't felt that anything was wrong until he began pointing out how she should behave.

Your spouse may be respectful and appreciative without feeling as at home as you would like. People are different. You may feel comfortable with your in-laws while your spouse finds it harder with yours. That doesn't necessarily mean that anyone is doing something wrong.

You can help by asking for something on your spouse's behalf or making conversation easier. You don't have to insist that everything be done directly. Give people room to become comfortable without making every visit a test of how well they get along.

Sometimes you become occupied with deciding who needs to understand things differently. Your wife should be less nervous about a visit, or your parents should understand why she wants notice. But instead of deciding who needs correcting, consider who can help you find an arrangement that works.

Perhaps your parents would happily call before coming. Perhaps your spouse would be comfortable with a visit at a particular time. You don't have to get everyone to feel the same way before making things easier. Sometimes speaking to the person who is more receptive accomplishes much more than trying again to convince the person you think is being unreasonable.

What would you like to be different?

If your spouse spends a great deal of time with parents or siblings, first try to understand what draws them there. Perhaps it is familiarity. Perhaps they feel appreciated, their opinions are taken seriously, and conversation comes easily. That doesn't automatically mean that you have done something wrong. But understanding what they enjoy there may help you make your own time together more comfortable.

Sometimes a husband doesn't notice how often he challenges his wife. Every opinion becomes a discussion. Something she learned at home needs correcting; a practice in her family needs explaining away. He doesn't mean to hurt her, but with her mother and sisters she feels understood, while with him she keeps having to defend herself. Not every difference needs to be questioned. Where something has a practical bearing on your home, get the guidance you need. But there may be plenty of room to appreciate her and let a difference remain.

And when you do speak about the time you would like together, say what you want. “Why are you always at your mother's?” is very different from, “I would really enjoy having half an hour together in the evening.” Perhaps you would like a walk, a meal at home, or time to discuss something without interruptions. Be clear and specific. “We need to be more connected” doesn't necessarily tell the other person what you are asking for.

You can appreciate the family connection while asking for something in your own marriage. “I'm happy that you're close with your mother. I would also enjoy having this time with you.” Usually,

this is something to discuss directly with your spouse, rather than asking the mother-in-law or a marriage teacher to deliver the message.

And be careful not to turn a difficulty between you into an attack on your spouse's parents. “You're always busy with your mother. I can't stand your family. Stop speaking to them already.” Perhaps you genuinely need more time together, or there is some involvement that needs to change. Discuss that. You don't have to put down the parents or make your spouse feel that being close to you means turning against them.

The same applies when something about your spouse's behavior bothers you. “You're just like your father.” “That's what happens when you grow up in a home like yours.” What are you accomplishing? Something needs attention between the two of you, and now you've brought the parents and the whole upbringing into the argument.

If something needs to change, speak about what is happening and what you need. There may be things from the past that your spouse needs help understanding or working through. That doesn't make them something for you to use against him or her. You want to help your marriage, not give each other more hurt to carry.

When your spouse makes an effort, show appreciation before everything is exactly as you hoped. You may still want more time together, but don't overlook the time that was made for you. Let your spouse hear that you enjoyed it and that it meant something to you.

And not every couple gets the beginning they imagined. *Hashem* sends different circumstances—financial strain, a medical difficulty, other challenges. You may not have had the first year of marriage you expected. Someone once told me that he had been married for fifteen years and was still suffering over not having had that first year as it was supposed to be.

You can't turn back the clock. But you can get closer now. You can work together and get to know one another in the circumstances you have. Not everything has to be smooth and comfortable for you to strengthen the marriage.

Ask yourself a few questions. Don't answer too quickly. Think about what your spouse would say. Am I respectful? Am I accepting? Am I giving? Am I communicating what needs to be communicated, or waiting for the other person to understand on their own?

Am I clear about what I need? Do I know what I'm asking for? Am I appreciative of what I've already received, even before I receive more? And when I'm hurt, do I express the hurt, or only the anger and blame?

“I feel hurt. I know you didn't mean to hurt me. I know you care about me. But I feel hurt.”

These questions are for yourself. Not, “I hope my wife heard that,” or, “I hope my husband is listening.” What can you do with them?

Remember when it is your turn

As you do that, remember this experience. When you marry off your own children, don't impose on them what you found difficult yourself. Many people expect their children to do things they would never have wanted their own parents to demand of them. Getting older shouldn't make us feel more entitled.

A veteran *maggid shiur* told me that a former student had asked how he had raised such a wonderful family. He hadn't thought of himself as having a particular method and attributed his *nachas* to *Hashem*. When the student kept asking, he said that he would ask his children what they thought.

One of his daughters, herself a *rebbetzin*, answered immediately. She remembered how her father had hosted his in-laws and treated them with such respect and devotion. In her eyes, that example had made a lasting impression on the children.

While you are working out your relationship with your parents and in-laws, your own children are watching. What they see in your conduct can teach them something that another explanation may not.

They say there are two kinds of people who walk into a room. One says, “Here I am!” The other says, “There you are!” I don't think it's quite so black and white. It's fine to see yourself and other people too. But it takes some introspection to notice how you come across.

As you get older and your children grow up, keep trying to see what the relationship looks like from their side. The space you need now is something your adult children will need too, *im yirtzeh Hashem*.

Chapter 11

Looking back at your upbringing

As you get older, you begin to notice things you didn't understand as a child. You have a home of your own, you're raising children, and you're learning about marriage and *chinuch*. Naturally, you look back at how things were done in your parents' home.

But sometimes it almost becomes a new stage of adulthood: now it's your turn to mark your parents' performance. You hear a discussion about parenting, psychology, or trauma, and immediately begin checking. Were my parents like that? Did they understand me? Should they have handled that differently? Does what happened in our home fit what this person is describing? Every new idea becomes another way to assess them.

There are things worth understanding, and real difficulties that need help. But be careful about assuming that growing up means taking your place as the judge of your upbringing. You can become so occupied with deciding what your parents did right and wrong that it begins to shape every conversation with them.

Marriage can bring this out even more. You're dealing with a new person and a relationship you haven't had before. Things don't always come easily. Now you look back for an explanation. “That's because of how I was brought up.” Or your spouse says, “That's how they did things in your home.” Before long, the parents become part of an argument between husband and wife, or every difficulty in the marriage becomes another complaint against them.

You don't have to decide that your parents did everything right, and you don't have to make them responsible for everything that is difficult now. Understand what you need to understand, get help where you need it, and use what you learn in your own home. But don't let examining the past become the whole way you relate to your parents in the present.

It would be a shame to wait until you have married children yourself to begin appreciating what your parents were dealing with.

What are you making of the past?

A woman once wrote to me that in her childhood home, speaking nicely, respect, and consideration were things expected outside. At home, people spoke however they wanted. Parents shouted at children to stop shouting. She hadn't realized that family life could be different until she became close to a friend whose home was calmer and more accepting.

Now she was married to a wonderful husband. They had a loving, respectful relationship, but she noticed that she sometimes became impatient and spoke unpleasantly. She was getting help with difficult feelings connected to her upbringing. She also wanted to know how to work on the habits she had brought into her marriage.

First, we have to acknowledge that treating the people at home badly while being courteous to everyone outside isn't right. Sometimes we take the most liberties with the people closest to us. We expect more from them, let our guard down, and speak in ways we wouldn't speak to someone else. Closeness doesn't make that acceptable.

At the same time, not every difference between public and private behavior means that someone is a fake. People behave differently in the comfort of their homes.

I remember hearing about a *melamed* who didn't want a student, who was also his nephew, staying in his home. In the classroom, he was the *rebbi*. At home, the child might see him relaxing on the couch with something to read. Some people saw that as being two-faced.

But a classroom and a living room aren't the same place. Not wanting a student to see you in every private moment doesn't necessarily mean that your public conduct is false.

Of course, extreme differences can be very hurtful. Someone who gives a spouse the silent treatment for weeks and then becomes cheerful the moment a friend calls is causing pain. I'm not putting that together with ordinary differences in how people behave at home. But don't automatically interpret everything you saw in the privacy of your parents' home as proof that the person everyone else knew wasn't real.

Do you also notice what they gave you?

When you look back at your upbringing, do you also notice the good? You can explain what your parents should have understood, where they should have been more patient, and what they should have done differently. But these are also the people who changed your diapers, got up for you at night, paid your tuition, and did what they could to bring you to where you are today. Does that enter the picture too?

Sometimes it is only after marriage, when you begin budgeting for yourself, that you start understanding what things cost. Rent, food, clothing, tuition. You have one or two children, and you see how much money and effort it takes. What did your parents do all those years? And what did it take for them to marry you off and help you establish your own home?

There is so much that a child receives without thinking about it. That is normal when you're little. But now you're older. You're carrying responsibilities yourself. It is time to look back with some appreciation too.

That doesn't mean that everything was right or that something painful didn't happen. But if you are old enough to notice the mistakes, you are also old enough to notice the devotion, the effort, and what you received. Don't make the people who brought you up responsible for every difficulty you have while hardly giving thought to all they did for you.

I once spoke to a *chosson* who had difficulties with his parents. I asked whether he recognized how much they had done for him and invested in helping him succeed. “Of course they did,” he answered. “They didn't want a failure for a son.” He had taken all that effort and explained it in a way that left him with no reason to feel grateful.

Perhaps your parents also wanted to feel good about you. Does that erase what they gave? Don't become so occupied with examining their motives that every good thing loses its meaning.

The same applies when they offer help now. If there is actual pressure or control attached, that needs attention. But don't assume that every gift has a hidden condition or that accepting it must mean something uncomfortable about you. Sometimes your parents want to give. You can receive graciously and appreciate it.

Don't make your parents responsible for everything

Perhaps your upbringing contributed to some of your habits. It can. But the tendency to attribute every difficulty, every instinct, and every bad character trait to the parents is often taken much too far.

I was once speaking to someone who was dealing with personal challenges. The person helping him kept directing everything toward something that must have happened in childhood. If he didn't remember anything, perhaps it had happened before he could remember.

That can become a very easy explanation for everything. But pointing to the parents doesn't, by itself, establish what caused the difficulty.

Almost everyone can find ways in which their parents could have done better. That doesn't mean every shortcoming they have now came from those mistakes. People have their own nature too. Siblings can grow up in the same home and respond very differently. One is affected more in one way, another in a different way. That doesn't mean the upbringing had no effect. It means the picture isn't always as simple as we make it.

And even where the connection is real, what are you doing with it now? If every time you lose patience with your husband, your thought is, “You see what my father did to me,” where does that leave your responsibility? Your father isn't the one speaking to your husband now. You are.

It may explain why something is difficult. It doesn't make the way you treat another person acceptable. Nor does repeating the explanation necessarily help your relationship with your parents. Every present difficulty becomes another charge against them, and you keep returning to the past instead of dealing with what is happening now.

There is also something to appreciate in the present. The woman who wrote had described a good husband and a good marriage. That is a great blessing. Don't become so occupied with the difficult home you came from that you fail to take care of the good home you have now.

We also have to remember that we didn't choose the home into which we were born. These circumstances were part of *Hashem's* plan for us. That doesn't justify another person's wrongdoing or decide how we must respond. But you didn't grow up outside *Hashem's* plan. The circumstances brought you to where you are, and now you have choices about what to do with them.

When there really is hurt

None of this means that painful experiences aren't real. Someone once wrote to me about growing up with constant conflict between the parents: name-calling, anger, manipulation, and frightening outbursts. The children had retreated to their rooms and tried to ignore it.

Now, as adults, they were beginning to speak about what they had experienced. The writer wanted to know how to heal and how to help the siblings still at home.

Pain is real. Feelings are real. Traumatic experiences are real. Sometimes people hope that if they wait long enough, everything will disappear. With smaller things, perhaps it does. But serious or repeated experiences can remain with a person. Getting older doesn't automatically mean that you have dealt with them.

If you have serious difficulties from your upbringing, trauma, or other issues that need attention, deal with them. There is help available, and you should get the help you need. But try to deal with those difficulties without turning them into your whole relationship with your parents.

Not every conversation or interaction needs to become another part of what you are working through. Get help with the hurt, and with understanding how to manage the relationship, rather than letting the hurt become the relationship itself.

For one person, writing things down is helpful. Another needs a trusted person who can listen and understand. Sometimes therapy is needed. I've also helped people with EFT as a tool for dealing with negative emotions. Different people may need different approaches.

But what are you looking for from the help? You want understanding, certainly. You may need someone to acknowledge how painful it was. But you also want help moving forward. If every conversation leaves you more occupied with what happened, more angry, and more convinced that you cannot do better because of it, notice that.

There is a difference between being helped through pain and continually being returned to it. Sometimes people become more comfortable with their resentment because now someone understands why they have it. But you are still the person carrying it. You want help that allows you to live better, rather than only an explanation of why life is so difficult.

Understanding your parents' limitations can sometimes change the way you carry what happened. It doesn't mean they were right. It means that perhaps they didn't have the understanding, the tools, or the ability to manage things better. You may begin to feel some compassion for how limited they were, instead of seeing their conduct only as something directed against you.

That isn't magic. It doesn't remove every painful feeling. But there can be a difference between, “Look what they did to me,” and, “They had difficulties that affected me. I need help with what remains, but I don't want to keep living inside their difficulties.”

And don't decide that you are damaged beyond repair. A difficult childhood can leave a mark. It doesn't mean that you are doomed to repeat it. I've seen people take responsibility, get the help they needed, and build good marriages and homes.

Supporting one another

Siblings who went through difficulties together can be a tremendous help to each other. They understand things that others may not understand. They can give warmth, encouragement, and some of the support that is missing elsewhere.

But be careful what happens when you get together. Does it become another discussion of the worst things that happened at home? Another opportunity to establish who suffered most and how much everyone is still suffering? You may feel understood, but are you helping one another become stronger?

There is a place for someone to hear your pain. I'm not saying that every conversation about the past is wrong. But if the relationship between siblings becomes built around repeated complaints about the parents, it can keep everyone caught in the same resentment. You can understand what was difficult and still encourage one another to be better spouses, better parents, and healthier people.

Younger siblings may need particular care. Be there for them. Let them feel that they have someone who hears them and cares about them. But don't begin opening their eyes to things they aren't ready to understand or tearing away whatever respect and security they still have at home. You don't want it to become the children against the parents.

Sometimes a teacher or another suitable person can help support a younger child. You may need guidance about what to say and what not to say. Helping doesn't mean that you personally have to become everyone's therapist.

Acknowledge it to the person you hurt

When you notice something in your own conduct, don't only discuss it with someone outside the relationship. It is good that you can tell a therapist or write in an email, “I know that I lose patience. I know that I don't speak nicely.” Can you say that to your spouse too?

Sometimes a person knows privately that he is wrong but continues insisting to the other person that everything is their fault. That leaves the other person carrying something you yourself know isn't true. If speaking is difficult, perhaps writing would make it easier. But find a way to acknowledge what you know.

“I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken that way. This is something I need to work on.” That matters. It lets your spouse know that you aren't justifying what happened or expecting them to believe that they caused your outburst. And when you stop defending the conduct, it can become easier to work on it.

You don't have to wait until you have resolved every question about your childhood before you begin taking responsibility for how you speak today.

Learn from what you experienced

I remember a man whose marriage was in serious trouble. When people tried to explain what was wrong with the way he treated his wife, he kept saying, “That's what my father did.” He had spoken negatively about his father's conduct himself. He knew how painful it had been. But now it had become the explanation for his own conduct.

You saw what it did. Let that become a reason to work on doing things differently. Someone else may not understand the effects. You do.

But doing things differently doesn't necessarily mean doing the exact opposite. Sometimes a person remembers what bothered him at home and becomes determined that his children will never experience anything like it. He may avoid that particular difficulty while creating another one.

A boy grows up with parents who constantly supervise his schoolwork. Which tests are coming? Did he finish his homework? They speak to his teachers and keep checking. He hates the pressure. When he has children, he decides that home will be a relaxed place and schoolwork will stay in school. Then his children begin struggling, and he discovers that they need more involvement than he has been giving.

Your experience can help you understand what needs care. It doesn't give you a formula that will work for every child. Notice the children you have and what they need, rather than deciding that whatever is furthest from your parents' approach must be right.

A *rav* once told me that he had almost never seen his parents disagree. The one time the children saw it, they thought something terrible was happening because it was so unusual. The point isn't to envy his childhood. It is to think about what you would like your own children to be able to say.

That doesn't mean demanding perfection from yourself. Working on yourself takes time. Notice the situations that repeatedly become difficult. Is it every *Erev Shabbos*? Every bedtime? When you're tired or haven't eaten? Some things can be prepared for or avoided. Others can't, but knowing the pattern can help you be ready.

Make the work manageable. Perhaps for the next few hours you won't raise your voice, even if you feel upset inside. Behaving differently from what you feel doesn't make you a fake. You're choosing not to let the feeling decide your conduct. You can deal with the feeling afterward, talk about it, or get help understanding it.

Sometimes that also means accepting a practical price. Perhaps you will leave later than you wanted. Perhaps the house won't be as orderly as you hoped. If you are trying not to shout while still insisting that everything must happen exactly as you want, you may find yourself losing patience again. Recognize what may remain uncomfortable while you work on your response.

Trying is itself worthwhile. You may need a better approach or more guidance, but don't dismiss the effort because you haven't become the person you hoped to be yet. Ask *Hashem* for help,

appreciate small improvements, and keep working. You can learn from your upbringing without making it an excuse for your conduct or the whole basis of your relationship with your parents.

Chapter 12

Accepting parents who are not perfect

Your parents aren't robots. They aren't perfect. They make mistakes. Sometimes they have unrealistic expectations. Just as parents need to accept children, children need to accept parents.

A *bochur* told me about a group of older boys who met regularly and sometimes invited speakers. They invited a man who helped parents of struggling children. His message to parents was acceptance, understanding, and unconditional love. The boys thought that was what he would discuss with them too.

He told them, “When I speak to parents, I tell them to accept their children. To you, I want to speak about accepting your parents.” The boys hadn't expected that message.

When people begin demanding acceptance from each other, nobody gains. Acceptance is something to give. Parents should make their homes welcoming, and children should be understanding. Spending your time noticing how much your parents notice, and how unaccepting they are, doesn't help build the relationship.

Finding the good in a comment

A woman once wrote to me that her mother-in-law had said her *sheitel* could use some touching up. Later she mentioned it to a friend. “That's so tactless! Aren't you insulted?”

The woman wondered why she needed to take it that way. Why couldn't the comment mean that her mother-in-law wanted her to look her best? Why did it have to mean, “She thinks I'm a slob”?

Sometimes the same comment can be understood in two ways, and we immediately choose the one that hurts. We know that if another person had said it, we might have appreciated it. That is something to think about.

Judging favorably isn't only something you do for the other person. It can make your own life happier. Holding on to “But they shouldn't have,” “But they're wrong,” and “How could they?” can leave you suffering long after the incident.

The woman also described a grandmother who wanted to know when she had first heard about a *simchah*. “Oh, so you told me late. When did you call your other grandmother? Before you called me?” It is easy to be annoyed. The writer felt that getting insulted was a choice and that people should interpret things positively.

But is getting insulted always a choice? *Hashem* made people differently. Some are naturally more sensitive. If you can rise above a comment and take it generously, that is wonderful. To expect everyone else to do it as easily isn't fair.

You were able to take your mother-in-law's comment well. That doesn't mean you can now judge your grandmother for having a harder time with her own feelings. I'm not saying that her reaction was right. But don't turn your ability into a standard with which to look down on another person.

An old way of speaking

Sometimes a mother dismisses her married daughter's opinion, and the daughter thinks, “I have children of my own already. Why does she still speak to me like that?”

It may be a way of speaking that began many years ago. When the children were small, the parent became accustomed to correcting them, telling them what to do, and not giving much weight to their opinions. The children grew older, but the way of speaking remained. The mother may not notice how it sounds now that her daughter has a home and children of her own.

That doesn't make the dismissive words right. But it can help you understand that your mother may be continuing an old habit without intending the insult you hear in it. You aren't going to educate her into becoming a different person. You can take that understanding into account as you work out how to speak with her respectfully and what you can comfortably discuss.

The same parent can also be easier for one child to relate to than for another. You may feel close to your father and find it difficult to understand why your brother struggles with him. Your brother may feel comfortable with your mother while you find that relationship more difficult. People have different personalities and connect differently.

That doesn't excuse disrespect. But before saying, “How can you have a problem with him? He's such a wonderful father,” remember that your ease with him doesn't tell you everything about your sibling's experience. You can appreciate your parents without assuming that every child finds the same things easy. And your sibling's difficulty doesn't have to become the way you see your parents either.

Work on yourself, not others

This isn't permission for sensitive people to stop working on themselves. It means that each person has their own work. We should judge others favorably and work on ourselves. We shouldn't expect others to judge us favorably and work on themselves.

Be careful with another person's feelings. When you are hurt, try to judge favorably and forgive. Those are different responsibilities, and you don't need to wait for the other person to do their part before considering your own.

At the same time, favorable interpretation isn't an excuse for the person who speaks carelessly. People sometimes make remarks with two possible meanings and then take no responsibility. “That's not what I meant!”

Hashem knows what we really meant. The fact that someone could interpret a comment generously doesn't justify putting criticism into it and keeping a ready defense. That is something to remember about our own words too.

When I was learning in *yeshivah*, I sat at a *shiur* with a group of students. There were strong learners, average learners, and weaker students who were drawn to the *rosh yeshivah's* warmth.

In the middle of the *shiur*, a twenty-year-old *bochur* sitting beside him suddenly kissed the *rosh yeshivah* on the cheek. Everyone was taken aback. It was awkward and seemed completely out of place. Almost immediately, the *rosh yeshivah* smiled and said, “He loves me.”

He found the good in that moment and took the tension out of it. What stayed with me was how naturally he did it.

People's intentions aren't always entirely one thing. Do they only want to hurt us? Usually not. Are they only expressing love and concern? Perhaps that isn't the whole picture either. Sometimes we can find the good within what was said.

Allowing the relationship to change

Someone wrote to me about feeling micromanaged while growing up. Everything was a big matter, and the writer had always wanted the father's approval but never felt it. The writer was careful to add that the childhood hadn't been horrible or damaging.

Now the relationship was very different. The parents supported their married children, were proud of them and their families, and showed love and acceptance. “I hope to be like them one day.”

Relationships can change. Parents may relate differently to children once they are married or away from home. Sometimes we need to make changes, and sometimes we need to allow changes to happen and notice them. Assuming that a difficulty must remain forever can keep us stuck.

It is also possible that our perspective has changed. “I never felt that I got his approval” describes what reached you. It doesn't necessarily tell us everything about what your father felt.

I've heard from parents who were proud of their children but somehow couldn't make the children feel that pride. Perhaps criticism drowned it out. Perhaps their way of expressing it wasn't received as they intended.

A father once told me that he spoke to other people about how happy he was with his children, hoping the message would reach them. Direct praise hadn't seemed to work. Even then, the children sometimes dismissed it. “My father said that? He doesn't mean it. He's just saying it.”

Sometimes allowing another person to make us feel good is part of what is missing. That doesn't mean I know what happened in your childhood. It means that there may be another way to understand at least some of it.

The *sefer Yesod Ha'emunah* explains that people rarely recognize a mistake while they are making it. Looking back and seeing that we have made mistakes before can help us acknowledge that what seems certain to us now may also need another look.

Sometimes the relationship really has changed. Sometimes we are seeing it differently. It is worth leaving room for both possibilities. And you can notice a flaw without making it the entire childhood. The writer who described being micromanaged also acknowledged that there had been much that was normal and good. It doesn't have to be all or nothing.

Remember your own limitations too

If you learned something about parenting that you wish your parents had known, use it with your own children. You can strive to parent differently while judging your parents favorably.

And about yourself too, it's fine to say, “I'm going to try my best. I'm going to mean well. And I won't micromanage myself, my parents, or my children.”

A reader described trying to listen to a child's account of a game while making supper, changing a diaper, and getting ready to leave. The game wasn't particularly interesting to her. But it interested her child, and she wanted to invest in their relationship. That doesn't mean she had to listen that minute.

“I'd love to hear about the game, but right now I'm a little overwhelmed. I need to finish a few things before I leave. Can you tell me about it at breakfast tomorrow? Or can you help me clean up so that I can be calmer and ready to hear?”

You can show that you want to listen while being honest about what you can manage now. You want to do the right thing, and there are still moments when you can't give everything you would like to give. Remember that when you think about what another person should have been able to do.

Be careful with the comparisons

There is a joke about two women who meet. One asks, “How are your children?” “My son married a witch. She stays in bed until eleven, spends his money all day, and when he comes home exhausted, she makes him take her out to an expensive restaurant.”

“And your daughter?” “Ah, she married a saint. He brings her breakfast in bed, gives her money to buy whatever she needs, and takes her out to dinner in the evenings.”

The same things can look very different depending on whose side we're seeing. There is also a difference between noticing the contrast between two families and repeatedly emphasizing it. You may feel that your parents are easier to be with than your in-laws. Be careful about making that comparison a message to your spouse or children.

Sometimes your spouse complains about his own parents, and it is tempting to join in: “Yes, I also can't stand it.” Or a comment to the children about a grandparent's nervousness carries your resentment along with it.

The fact that you feel mistreated doesn't make every way of expressing those feelings helpful. Notice what your words are doing to your spouse and to the children's relationship with their grandparents.

Sometimes your children notice that one set of grandparents gives more presents, takes them out more often, or invites them more frequently. You want them to understand the difference properly, so you begin explaining. But a long explanation can give the comparison more attention than it needed.

You don't have to turn every observation into a discussion about why one grandparent does more and another does less. Speak warmly about both. Notice the good things each brings to the family, and let the children hear those things naturally.

And remember that they pick up more than your words. If you feel resentful toward one set of parents, don't assume that saying the right things will keep the children from noticing. The way you receive an invitation, react to a gift, or speak afterward also affects how they see their grandparents. Work on your own attitude rather than relying only on explanations to give them the right one.

Accepting what the relationship can be

There are relationships where you have tried to communicate calmly and respectfully, and things still don't improve. Sometimes you have to accept that the relationship won't become what you want it to be.

It may remain civil and respectful rather than deeply satisfying. Making the most of that can be better than constantly hoping for more and being hurt again. Accepting reality isn't the same as hopelessness.

Nor does being respectful mean that you must take unlimited responsibility for making everything work. If accommodating someone is enabling dysfunction, that needs to be understood with appropriate guidance. There are situations where responsibilities toward your spouse, your children, or your own life mean that the arrangement needs to change. Get *da'as Torah* about the obligations and the practical circumstances.

And if you can't safely share a particular kind of information, that doesn't automatically mean you can share nothing. “I can't have the relationship I want, so I can't have a relationship at all” is another extreme. Sometimes a more limited connection is possible.

The One who gave us the *mitzvah* of honoring parents is the One who knows what is best for us. You can do your best to fulfill it, learn from what you have experienced, and continue working on the part of the relationship that is yours.

Chapter 13

Staying connected with respect

“When my children get married, how will I feel if they share with us the same amount of information I share with my parents?” One reader asked that question after realizing how little they shared with their own parents.

There were so many ordinary things to share. A good mark from a child, a letter, a cute recording. The writer hadn't thought about how much these little things could mean to the grandparents. Sometimes we only understand it when we are already on the other side, waiting to hear from our own children. It is better to think about it now.

There is still something to share

Sharing parts of your life can make your parents feel cherished. It is a way of fulfilling the *mitzvah* of honoring parents. You may see a small piece of news; they see that you remembered them and wanted them to be part of your life.

“But when I share, they start giving opinions. I send something about the children, and now I have to hear what I should be doing differently.” It is a shame when parents make sharing unpleasant. But don't turn it into all or nothing. Not sharing everything doesn't mean that you can't share anything. There is personal, sensitive information, and there is ordinary family news.

There is also a difference between keeping something private and announcing that you aren't going to share it. “Something happened, but I'm not telling you. I don't have to tell you everything.” Why say that? The fact that you don't have to discuss something doesn't mean that you need to make your mother feel excluded.

Very often, you can keep certain things private while continuing to share other things and build the relationship. Sometimes your mother will hear about something afterward and ask why you didn't tell her. You can deal with that respectfully when it happens. But you don't have to make a point of letting her know that there are things you aren't telling her.

Sometimes your parents are worried about something sensitive, such as waiting for children or a difficulty with one of the grandchildren. You may not want to discuss the details. But perhaps you can let them know that you have someone to turn to and that the matter is receiving attention. “We have guidance, and we're taking care of what needs to be done.” That can give them some reassurance without opening the whole subject.

Of course, you and your spouse need to agree about what you are comfortable sharing. And when there is good news, people may have different guidance about when to tell. Your parents shouldn't assume that their preferred timing is the only proper one. At the same time, remember that they may be worrying and hoping along with you. When you can appropriately share something reassuring or happy, don't overlook how much it may mean to them.

If you care about developing the relationship, look for subjects you can discuss comfortably. There may be an opinion you don't mind hearing or a question you would actually like to ask.

Not every conversation has to become a discussion about the most sensitive matter in your home. Sometimes it can be an ordinary question: “What should I do first, cook or clean?” You can ask for an opinion where hearing one won't unsettle you.

And don't dismiss an opinion only because you know your children better. You do know them better in many ways. But your emotional involvement can also make it harder to see clearly. Your parents may have experience and another perspective.

They may also be tactless, and perhaps they aren't the right people for you to consult. That doesn't mean that you have no need for guidance. Even the wisest people seek outside counsel. Find someone who can help you see what you may be missing.

Find that minute

During Covid, people began calling their parents much more often. They were worried and wanted to know that everyone was all right. In classes at that time, I encouraged people to keep the good habit even after the immediate concern passed.

People are busy. It is easy to make a call or send a message, but the day fills with tasks and we overlook what a minute of connection can do.

Make it manageable. Something scheduled is often easier to maintain. Knowing when your parents are available and calling then is more practical than trying your luck at a random time.

Your parents have a home too

Sometimes married children only see their own relationship with the parents. “Why can't my mother take us in for *Yom Tov*? Why don't they help us more?”

There may be other children at home. There may be several married families. Sometimes the needs of the children still at home come first. Parents may be afraid that a married child will become offended, and they neglect what the younger children need in order to keep the married one pleased. That isn't right, and the older children should be able to understand it.

There is another side to becoming independent. Sometimes a child asks, “How can they see me struggling and not help? Why don't they help more with my children? Why don't they invite us for *Shabbos*?”

Parents spent eighteen or twenty years raising you. Somewhere they may say, “Now it is your time.” When they want to help and are able to help, it is a wonderful thing. But that doesn't mean that they must carry you through your whole life. You want room to run your home, and your parents also need room to decide what they can do.

Sometimes you remember how much your parents did for an older sibling. Your mother moved in after a baby was born, watched the children during a vacation, or hosted the whole family for *Yom Tov*. Now you need similar help, and it isn't available. It can feel unfair, but the circumstances may no longer be the same. Your parents are older, their energy has changed, and there may be other things they are dealing with.

It isn't only a question of years. Something that was manageable last week may be too much this week. Before comparing what they gave someone else or what they did for you before, consider what they are capable of now. Having done it once doesn't mean that they can keep doing it.

I heard about a man who noticed that hosting his family was becoming harder for his aging parents. But he also knew that they enjoyed having everyone over and might feel hurt if the visits became less frequent.

From time to time, he would arrange to come for *Shabbos* and explain that his wife had already prepared the food before they decided to go away. They would bring it along. His parents could enjoy hosting without having to do all the work, and without feeling that everyone was making an issue of what they could no longer manage.

What impressed me was the thought he put into it. He understood both their limitations and their wish to keep giving, and found a way to consider both.

And don't think that because you've grown up, you no longer need your parents. When a person goes through a difficulty, when he feels stuck and doesn't know where to turn, very often his father and mother are the ones who are there for him.

You may have a home and children of your own. That doesn't mean that you have no more need for the connection with your parents. Take care of it.

When you visit, remember that you aren't in your own territory. Your hosts have opinions, likes, and dislikes. Parents should make the home comfortable for children, and children should be considerate of the parents' home too.

That includes noticing when it is time to leave. You enjoyed supper together, but now your hosts may want to clean up, put children to bed, or have some quiet time. A pleasant visit doesn't have to continue until somebody becomes uncomfortable enough to end it.

And consider both people in the home. Your mother may be happy to keep talking while your father is getting tired. Your son may enjoy having you stay while his wife is ready to get on with the evening. Parents visiting married children need particular sensitivity here, because the children may feel unable to ask them to leave. Don't wait until someone has to find a way to tell you that the visit has become too much.

Sometimes a child feels that the parents keep inviting them because they want something from them. “Why do they need us there every *Shabbos*?” Perhaps. But perhaps they think they're helping you. You don't have to prepare the meals. You can come and enjoy.

Your parents may not be so young anymore. They could have made a small, simple meal for themselves. Instead, they're preparing a meal for your family too. It may be an effort for them, and they may be doing it because they want to give. Before deciding what an invitation means, take a minute to consider that side too.

Sometimes your parents want you for every meal of *Yom Tov*, and you and your spouse would like some meals at home with the children. Once you've clarified what is appropriate for your situation, consider whether there are other ways to spend time together. Perhaps you can visit in the afternoon, come for dessert, or arrange a shorter visit that works better for the family.

Don't make yourself and everyone else exhausted trying to fit everything in. But don't assume that the only choices are to come for the whole meal or not see your parents at all. You may be able to give your own family the time it needs and still let your parents enjoy being with you.

And when you do come, let your parents feel that you are happy to be there. Sometimes there is so much discussion about the meals you aren't coming for that nobody notices how much you enjoy the ones you do share.

Tell them that you're looking forward to it. Perhaps you can bring a cake, or one of the children can prepare something to say at the table. While you're there, take an interest and show

appreciation. Afterward, mention something you enjoyed. These are small things, but they let your parents feel that the visit meant something to you.

Sometimes a person spends a great deal of time somewhere but hardly gives that impression. Another comes for less time, greets everyone warmly, participates, and leaves people feeling glad he came. It isn't only a question of how many hours you were there. Let the time you do spend together become something your parents can enjoy and remember, rather than leaving all the attention on when you couldn't come.

When another child hurts your parents

Sometimes you see a parent being hurt by one of your siblings, and you want to make up for it. You call more, visit more, and try to make sure that at least from you, your father or mother will have some pleasure. It is a good thing to show love and respect. But be careful about taking on the responsibility of compensating for everything another child isn't giving.

You may begin doing more than you can manage, become the person who hears every complaint, and feel guilty whenever your parent is still unhappy. Eventually, you become exhausted and resentful too. You can care about the pain without becoming responsible for removing it. Be loving and respectful, and help where you can, but don't assume that you must now carry the whole difficulty between your parent and your sibling.

And if it bothers you to see what is happening, you don't have to become upset with yourself for caring. These are people you love. Of course it can hurt to watch them hurt each other. Recognizing that you aren't responsible for fixing the situation doesn't mean that you should feel nothing.

But be careful that trying to deal with the distress doesn't become something that occupies your whole day. You keep discussing it, writing about it, going over what happened, and trying to reach a feeling of acceptance. Sometimes the effort to feel better keeps bringing you back to the same difficulty.

Give yourself some time to speak to someone or write things down if that helps. Then try to return to what is yours to do. “This bothers me, but I didn't cause it, and I can't necessarily resolve it.” You can remain caring and respectful without continually working on a problem that isn't yours to settle.

Getting involved in your parents' marriage

Sometimes a child finds himself between his father and mother. They aren't getting along, and each wants him to understand their side. He wants to be good to both, and now he feels responsible for making things work between them.

Sometimes nobody asked him. He sees how they speak to one another, and he feels that now that he is older, he should be able to do something. “When I was younger, I couldn't help. Now I understand what's going on. I have a home of my own. Perhaps I can explain it to them.”

First, don't look down at your parents because they aren't getting along. It is sad, but people struggle with relationships. Some have fewer tools or more difficult personalities to contend with. The fact that you are managing better, or expect that you would manage better, doesn't mean that you should look down at them.

Their difficulty doesn't erase their devotion to you as parents or your obligation to respect them.

And certainly don't use their disagreements against them. I've seen children answer a mother disrespectfully by repeating something their father had said about her. “That's because you're always like that. Tatty is right.” Or they say the same sort of thing to their father, using their mother's complaints.

The parent was wrong to speak that way in front of the children. But that doesn't give the children permission to use the words to hurt the other parent.

Wanting to help is one thing. Trying to educate your parents is another. You can't bear the way Tatty speaks to Mommy, and you are going to teach him. You know more about these matters now. You've heard *shiurim*. You've learned things they never learned. Be careful with that attitude. Being married doesn't make it your place to educate your parents.

There is also the practical question of whether you can help. Mixing into any relationship takes understanding and caution. People who haven't been getting along for years aren't necessarily going to hear a few words from you and suddenly understand each other.

You may become drained and frustrated, both may become upset with you, and your own relationship with one or both parents may suffer. Sometimes the two people make up, and the person who tried to help is left with the problem.

What if a parent asks you to get involved? A woman wrote that her mother often called after disagreements with her father and asked her to speak to him. Her mother believed that he would listen to her. The daughter kept suggesting professional help, but she felt guilty. Perhaps as a daughter she had a responsibility to do more.

Being asked doesn't by itself mean that you are able to accomplish what is being asked. You want to help your parents. But you can't do more than you can do, and you don't want to do something that makes matters worse. Questions about your obligations need *da'as Torah*, together with an honest understanding of what your involvement is likely to accomplish.

There are exceptions. Someone once told me that he had a daughter who knew how to speak to him and his wife. When something came up, she could give it over in a way that helped, and things would settle. Beautiful.

If you have that ability, have seen that it works, and can help respectfully, don't dismiss the opportunity simply because “it's not my business.” But that isn't the same as hoping that this time you will find the words, when experience has shown that your involvement doesn't help.

Even when you do have a place to say something, it needs tremendous respect and care. The fact that something seems obvious, or that other people have noticed it too, doesn't allow you to speak disrespectfully.

If you decide to raise a concern, begin with appreciation and understanding. Recognize what your parents have carried over the years. You aren't approaching them as someone who is smarter than they are.

Sometimes, if they can hear it, you can gently describe your own experience. “I remember feeling afraid when there was tension at home. Perhaps the younger children are finding it difficult too.”

But proceed carefully. If even a small comment is received badly, that tells you something. You may not be the right person to discuss it with them. The aim is often to help them consider getting appropriate guidance, not to become their therapist yourself.

Listening also needs judgment. Sometimes listening to a parent is a real help. The parent feels heard, becomes calmer, and can go on more comfortably. Sometimes listening and agreeing only make the grievance larger. “Even my daughter understands how wrong he is.” You thought you were helping, but the conversation has made the parent more angry and more convinced of the complaint.

If you don't feel that the conversation is helpful or good for you, you can say so respectfully. “Mommy, I feel bad that you're going through this. I wish I could be more helpful. I don't feel that I know how to help with these conversations, and I don't think it's good for me to hear this. I think someone else could help you more.”

“You don't even care. You don't want to listen.” You don't have to become so intimidated that you agree to something you don't think is right. “I really do care. I wish I could help. I just don't feel that I can do this or that it's helping.” You can be clear without becoming harsh.

Suggesting help needs sensitivity too. You don't want it to sound like, “You don't know how to run your marriage.” You can say, “I feel for you. I don't know what I would do in your situation. I think there are people who understand these things better than I do and could be more helpful.”

Sometimes gently hearing the suggestion more than once makes a person more comfortable with it. Sometimes an appropriate person can help you understand how to bring it up.

We also have to distinguish ordinary disagreements from abuse. If a parent is genuinely suffering in an abusive relationship, remaining outside the role of mediator doesn't mean refusing to listen or offer encouragement. There may be a real need for emotional support and appropriate help.

But even then, you need wisdom and often individual guidance. Encouragement that makes someone more angry, provokes the other person, or worsens the situation isn't the help you intended to give.

You can care deeply without taking responsibility for settling every disagreement. Sometimes the most helpful thing is to do less, because the involvement itself is making things worse. And where there is something you can genuinely do, you want to do it carefully, respectfully, and with *Hashem's* help.

When one concern takes over

Sometimes the difficulty isn't only that a parent gives advice. One particular subject begins to enter every conversation. A mother discovers a treatment or a practitioner she believes in, and suddenly every child and grandchild needs it. She keeps asking whether they went, whether they followed the advice, and why they haven't done anything yet. What began as concern becomes something the whole family is expected to arrange its life around.

Having a strong interest or conviction doesn't by itself mean that something is wrong. But sometimes a person becomes so taken up with one thing that it begins to interfere with relationships and ordinary life. Instead of noticing that, the person sees everyone else's reluctance as the problem.

You don't help by going along with everything simply because otherwise your mother will be upset. Sometimes that allows the demands to grow until it becomes much harder to do anything differently. You need proper guidance about what to accommodate and where to stop, while continuing to speak respectfully.

And even if you cannot agree about this subject, there may be other things you can discuss and other ways to remain close. You don't have to keep arguing about the treatment, and you don't have to make every conversation about why you aren't following the advice. You can continue calling, showing interest, and helping where you can, even while this particular disagreement remains.

Brief, informative, friendly, and firm

Sometimes there is a recurring difficulty and you do need to make something clear. A woman wrote about helping her father and described what happened when she arrived. He wasn't ready. She helped as much as she could, but when it was time to leave he became upset that she couldn't stay longer.

“I was here for this amount of time,” she told him. “I explained before I came that this was the time I could give.”

She had tried explaining the problem, and he didn't seem to understand. She and her husband had begun visiting less, but she felt that they were only brushing the issue away.

She also described what happened when they arranged a time for supper. Her husband came straight from work, ready to begin, but her father was late. They sat wondering whether to start eating. When he arrived, he said, “Oh, it's fine, nothing happened. Just relax.”

There was no apology. She felt that when her father needed her time, everything else had to wait, but when it came to her time, there was no acknowledgment.

If you haven't explained something, try. It would be a shame not to communicate because you decided on your own that it couldn't work. But if you've tried several times and the same difficulty remains, perhaps you're using a logical explanation for an emotional issue.

More explanation may bring more resistance. And trying to educate your father about what he should understand isn't necessarily respectful or productive.

“I told you already. I explained it before.” Even when the facts are correct, the words can sound like a reprimand. He's your father, not a little boy.

You can clarify your availability beforehand, as she did. Then, before the moment becomes difficult, remind him calmly. “I have another fifteen minutes, Tatty. I have to leave at six. Let's see what we can still accomplish. I'd love to do whatever I can.”

At six, “I'd love to stay longer, but I need to go.” And go. You told him beforehand, you gave a friendly reminder, and you followed through. It may take time for him to become accustomed to it, but you aren't arguing with him or waiting until he is already upset to explain why he shouldn't be.

In my book I discuss B.I.F.F.—Brief, Informative, Friendly, and Firm. Brief and Informative mean that you give the facts that need to be communicated without unnecessary explanations. Friendly is the tone. Firm is the confidence and clarity underneath it.

It isn't an effort to change the other person. It is a way to give your own message clearly and respectfully.

Saying it with respect

If your parents have recently become more critical, it is worth considering what changed. You notice the comments because they bother you. But did something happen before the comments began?

Perhaps you are making different choices, and something genuinely concerns them. Perhaps you used to share more, and now they feel further away from your life. Or perhaps the change

has little to do with you. They may be under stress, have less to occupy them, or find things harder as they get older.

None of that automatically makes the criticism right or means that you caused it. But understanding what brought it on can help you decide how to respond. There may be a concern worth discussing, a connection worth making warmer, or something difficult in their own lives to take into account. Don't become so occupied with how they are speaking that you never consider what may have changed.

Sometimes you need to say something about parental involvement itself. “Tatty, Mommy, I know you mean our good, and I appreciate how much you care. I'll work this out with my husband. If you don't mind, please leave this issue to us. I know it comes up from time to time, but I'd appreciate not discussing it so much.”

Or, “I know you mean my good. This is something I'll work out with my wife. We have someone to turn to for guidance. *Baruch Hashem*, we're taking care of it.”

You don't say, “Who are you to get involved?” You don't say, “My husband says that what you're telling me is wrong.” You can acknowledge their concern and make your request without bringing another person into an argument against them.

And if you didn't speak respectfully, apologize. “I'm sorry I spoke that way.” The fact that you felt pressured doesn't make the way you answered right. You can recognize that without entering another argument about whether you should have shared the information.

Sometimes people hesitate to apologize because they think it means agreeing to do everything differently from now on. It doesn't necessarily mean that. You can apologize for how you spoke or for the hurt that came out of the conversation without promising to tell your mother everything in the future. If she asks for that promise, you will need to address it separately. But don't let the fact that you still need some privacy stop you from acknowledging something you did wrong.

Sometimes visiting a little less is a way of preserving the relationship. Not everything has a neat solution. There are situations best handled by avoiding some of the circumstances that repeatedly cause difficulty.

Sidestepping the candy store isn't always laziness. You want to teach a child not to demand everything he sees, but sometimes avoiding the temptation is the sensible choice. The teaching that a *nazir* should keep away from the vineyard makes that point. There will be enough necessary challenges without creating another one.

A manageable visit can leave less resentment than a longer visit that ends badly. When you do visit, clarify your plans and give the friendly reminders before it is time to go.

Even after you've thought it through, received guidance, and spoken respectfully, your parents may still be disappointed. You decided that staying home for a meal was right for your family. They would have liked you to come. Those two things can both be true.

Sometimes a person feels, “But I made the right decision. Why are they upset?” Making a decision doesn't mean that you can also decide how everyone will feel about it. Their disappointment doesn't by itself mean that you chose wrongly. Nor does it mean that every way they express it is appropriate.

You can care about how they feel and consider whether there is something you can do to make it easier. But you may still need to go ahead without having everyone pleased with the arrangement. That is part of making a choice too.

More than the amount you do

Sometimes what parents want underneath their requests is a feeling of respect. One child may come less often but ask their opinion and make them feel important. Another does more but leaves them feeling that it is all being done reluctantly.

You may be doing a great deal already. Consider not only how much you do but how it is being received. Does your father feel that you value him? Does your mother hear appreciation? Perhaps there is something you can change without adding another task.

Sometimes a relationship becomes a pattern of one person pursuing and the other pulling away. Your mother wants more conversation, more information, more time. You feel pressured and withdraw. Now she feels even further away from you and tries harder. And you keep looking for ways to protect yourself from the next request.

Perhaps there is something you can initiate instead. Call when you have something comfortable to share. Ask for a recipe or an opinion you would appreciate hearing. Offer some time or help before being asked. Let your mother feel that you want a connection with her too, rather than that every conversation is something she has to get out of you.

This won't resolve every difficult relationship. But sometimes, even with a difficult parent, showing that you want to be close makes the parent calmer and less insistent. You may still need to keep certain matters private. You can also look for ways to make the relationship warmer.

It is worth trying to understand what they see. That doesn't require agreeing with every request. It can help you find a way to remain close while doing what you actually can.