OUT OF SIGHT, FRONT OF MIND

THE ADULT CHILD–PARENT/IN-LAW RELATIONSHIP

New message

To: rabbigruen@thevoiceoflakewood.com

Subject: personal experience

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. One thing I noticed and feel very strongly about is that when parents really mean the best for their child and the child feels it, they can do or say practically anything. I see it with my parents (I'm not saying this just because they're my parents; my sisters-in-law say the same about them) and friends' parents. 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 with and look to give *nachas* to.

Accepting a child and giving over that warm feeling is something that's very hard to teach parents; it's a very subtle thing. Complimenting your child's spouse, praising the couple's accomplishments, and in general making the home a nonjudgmental space are just some ways to go about it. Once the foundation of love and acceptance is cemented, a little comment or an intruding question won't shake the couple up, as the foundation is strong enough.

This is a topic I'm very passionate about, as I struggle to learn how to handle my in-laws, who don't accept any of their children's spouses. I've tried everything, including sending poems and packages and even daring to have an open conversation on the subject.

I think I can write another whole email sharing what it looks like from my in-laws' side, but since it's my concern to see what I can do better, that's what I'm trying to focus on. How can I improve this situation?

Send

RABBI GRUEN'S TAKE

1. An age-old issue

First of all, I want you to know that you're not alone. Telling mother-in-law jokes isn't nice, but the idea didn't come from nowhere... Being perceived as less-than by your in-law parents is enough to make you feel degraded and unwanted and doesn't lend itself to a harmonious family relationship, to say the least.

But aside from that validation, I want to take this opportunity to address anyone who thinks their in-law child may have written this or feel somewhat similarly. It's easier to go into justifying mode and explain why, in your particular case,



RABBI SHIMON GRUEN
FACILITATED BY CHAVA BEER

People are sometimes afraid to even acknowledge the other perspective. Say what they would say. Think about what they see. That's it



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you're either right for not showing acceptance or it's your daughter-in-law who's just misinterpreting your comments.

You might even be inclined to send her the answer through the editor and give her all the reasons why her parents-in-law don't appreciate her.

Don't do that.

It's important to just sit and realize what it looks like from the other side. Yes, the questioner is offering to hear ideas, and she acknowledges that there is another side. It's still important to realize: 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 other people? Many of the justifications you have are great, but as long as the other person doesn't relate to them or understand them, they aren't worth much and aren't helpful.

2. On becoming the Chafetz Chaim

You want to know how you can improve the situation. Well, guess what? I don't know if you have to improve the situation. Some people are very hard on themselves and take responsibility for everything. Taking responsibility is generally a mature behavior that's to be admired, yet sometimes it's a bit overdone. This is especially apparent in your case, because, as you related in your opening sentence, you put yourself down by apologizing for marrying your mother-in-law's son. This goes along with what they say about the Jewish people, who are known to apologize just for existing.

As a rule, you can't please everyone all the time. Granted, you must always be polite and respectful in all relationships. Once you've done yours, that's perfect; you're not obligated to make everything work. Sadly, there are people out there who are very hard to get along with, and bending over backward in an effort to please them may work against you.

Recently, someone in a relationship with an extremely difficult person told me, "I think the only way to make this work is to be a Chafetz Chaim and tolerate everything." I answered that while I'm sure the Chafetz Chaim would do a wonderful job in any relationship, just tolerating anything in a relationship is sometimes what enables more of the dysfunction or abuse to continue.

Maybe the fact that you take responsibility for being put down and for not being worthy of your husband is exactly the reason people are taking advantage of you. Taking more on yourself may exacerbate the current dynamics, as well-meaning as you may be.

This is a sensitive point that needs to be understood and applied correctly, but it's something to take into perspective.

3. It takes two

In the above point, I didn't mean to imply that there isn't necessarily a way forward. Very often, with the right tools and guidance, any relationship can be improved.

The first step? You've already mentioned it in your letter: seeing your in-laws' side of the story. Stepping out of one's narrow point of view to see the other side's perspective is a game changer when it comes to resolving conflict and improving relationships.

When I talk to people, I often prompt them to take this step by asking them, "What's your wife seeing? What are your parents seeing?" Usually, they have a hard time verbalizing it. Even in the comfort and privacy of my office, when they try to describe what someone else might be seeing, they often trivialize or negate that point of view as they are trying to express it. For instance: "Yeah, she would say that I'm always late, but it's totally not true," or, "They would say I'm not respectful at all, but that's only because they have crazy ideas about the respect they deserve."

You may be able to tune up your relationship without doing anything more or different. Switching your mindset might be all it takes to turn things around

I try to help people understand that I just asked them to say it. Nothing more. People are sometimes afraid to even acknowledge the other perspective. Say what they would say. Think about what they see. That's it. They don't have to be right in order for you to acknowledge or think about their point of view.

Sometimes, expressing the other side's point of view brings about the introspection and "Aha!" moment that can be the turning point of the relationship: *Oh! If that's what they're seeing, then even if I completely disagree with the perspective, I now understand why they're acting (or reacting in) a certain way. Now I know what it might take to make this relationship better.*

So even if you think that your in-laws are totally off and unjustified in their judgmental attitude, take a minute to think about where they're coming from. Understanding and acknowledging their perspective will already give you insight into what could be done differently.

4. Quality assurance

Aside from anything you might come up with, let me suggest something: Very often, your in-laws might say something like, "Well, you don't come enough," or, "You don't give enough."

What's really underlying these statements is not the practical aspect, because that could be what you've been trying to do more and more already. What they really want is a true feeling of respect.

Sometimes, when you respect someone's opinion or you make them feel important, they need much less of you and your services. Similarly, in our relationship with Hashem, "*Tena beni libcha li*"—Hashem wants our heart, not necessarily our actions. Sometimes one can do more with less heart, but Hashem prefers more heart with less action, and this principle is not all that different when it comes to dealing with the people around us.

This is often the case in the parent-child relationship. There may be one child who's more respectful. He asks his parents for their opinion and makes them feel good. From him, the parents may demand less and even go as far as excusing him for not being able to come often enough. At the other extreme, the child who might be bending over backward and visiting more often may be far less appreciated since the parents don't feel it's coming with the same attitude of respect. They may be misinterpreting the situation, but making sure they see it right will usually get you further than debating the facts.



It's a good idea to think about their side and ponder the following: Could it be that all their complaints (as unreasonable and judgmental as they may be) are simply a reaction to how they feel you think of them?

You may be able to tune up your relationship without doing anything more or different. Switching your mindset might be all it takes to turn things around.

5. Never compare

I completely agree that parents of married children should be respectful and show acceptance to all their children. Yet, the fact that you notice the contrast between your parents and your in-laws is something you have to keep inside. You should be careful not to verbalize or emphasize that to your spouse and certainly not to your children. Sometimes, people don't realize how they subtly bring out such distinctions. Pointing out these things, especially at the wrong times and in the wrong places, aside from being wrong, creates negative vibes with the spouse and the kids.

Even if it's your spouse that brings up such a point about his own parents, you shouldn't say, "Yeah, I also can't stand it." Don't tell your kids, "When we go to that Bubby's house, you have to be very careful because she gets very nervous."

People who feel mistreated often justify such messages, especially when they convince themselves that it's the other person's fault that the relationship is so strained. Even if you do feel unloved and uncared for, you still want to be careful never to express these sentiments to your spouse and children.

Using the insights I've elucidated above, I'm sure you, with your good intentions, will be able to bring this relationship to a better place.



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

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

