OUT OF SIGHT, FRONT OF MIND

THE ADULT CHILD–PARENT/IN-LAW RELATIONSHIP

QUESTION:

My father often asks me to take care of things for him, and I sometimes have to push him off because it takes away from my husband's time. Previously, my husband and I would constantly fight about this, and I would feel guilty if I didn't help my father with whatever he needed right away. Thanks to therapy, I've learned to work through this, yet the problem still arises from time to time.

For example, when I arrive at my father's house to help him, he's usually not ready for me. I help him as much as I can, but when it's time for me to go, he agitatedly asks why I can't stay longer. I tell him, "Look, I was here for X amount of time, and I explained to you before I came that this is the time I can give you. We accomplished what we could, and we'll continue next time."

Moreover, when it comes to my father's time, all else can wait, but when it comes to my time, there's no acknowledgement whatsoever. Whenever we invite him for supper, he's always late, even if we made up a specific time. My husband comes straight from work and wants to get started right away, and we sit around, wondering whether we should start eating or not. My father saunters in after a while, telling us, "Oh, it's fine, nothing happened, just relax" with no apology or sign of remorse for his late arrival.

We've learned to minimize the time we visit to avoid all this frustration, but really, we're just brushing the issue away. We've tried speaking to my father about it, but he doesn't seem to understand.

We've asked my mother to explain it to my father, but she, of course, takes his side, which a wife should do. But I feel that in this case, it's making the situation worse.

What can I do?

RABBI GRUEN RESPONDS:

1 Torah first

I'm glad you took steps to learn how to deal with the feelings of guilt and codependency. Therapy helps many people sort out their emotions and deal with challenges. It's crucial to point out, though, that any advice you receive, whether in therapy or anywhere else, must always be in line with the Torah and coming from a Torah perspective.

If therapy pulls anyone away from doing what the Torah requires, whether as part of *kibbud av v'eim* or in their relationship with their spouse, in the name of helping you feel less guilty, codependent, or anything else, that's terrible. As Torah-true Yidden, every step we take and every action we do must first and foremost be evaluated through a Torah lens.

According to the Torah, a married woman's first allegiance is to her husband, and only after that comes the obligation of honoring her parents. Remember, though, that as long as her husband has no objections, i.e., there's no contradiction between her two obligations, a married woman is required to honor her father just like anyone else. The details and extent of this obligation are some-



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thing a *rav* should help you understand, not a therapist. Once the Torah guidance is clear, you can turn to other forms of help to make it easier for you to do what's right with more confidence and less guilt. Every person and couple should be in contact with a *rav* for all *she'eilos*, including sensitive relationship-related issues.

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I'd add that putting a husband first isn't something that the husband should have to enforce. While there's much more to understanding the details and limits of a woman's obligations and responsibilities to her husband in general, in regard to the father-vs.-husband aspect, the Torah's idea is clear, and I invite and encourage you to get clear Torah guidance on the topic.

2 Respect begets respect

A lot of the frustration on your part and the resistance on your father's end may be because you're trying to appeal to him using logic. This is a common mistake people make in relationships. The more you explain yourself, the more frustration you'll have, and perhaps you'll even cause more resistance on the other side.

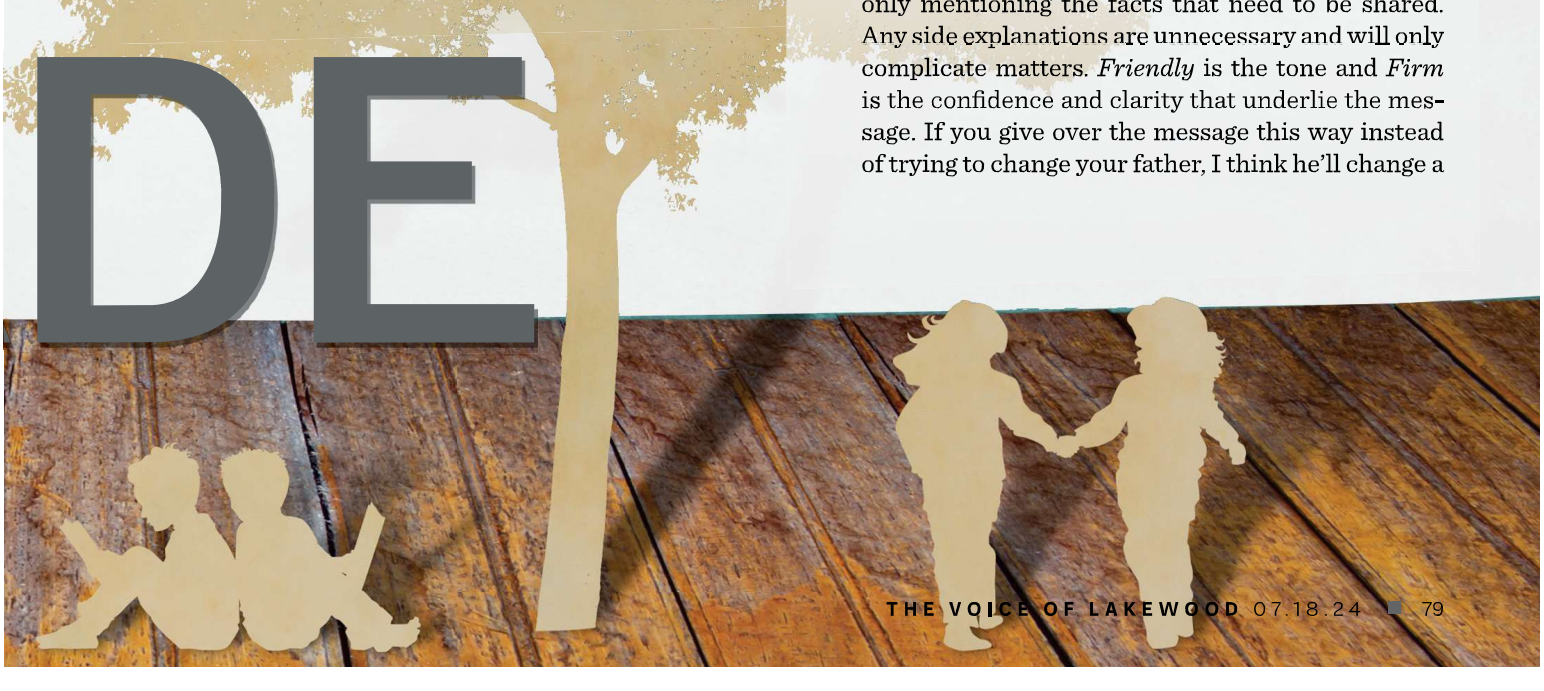
Surely, if you haven't tried to explain yourself to someone, go ahead and try. It would be a shame not to communicate because you decided on your own that it won't work. But if you've tried not once but a few times, and it didn't work, it's time to realize that it's not the explanation that wasn't working; rather, chances are that you're using a logical explanation for an emotional issue. Logic and emotions are two completely different languages. All this is aside from the fact that trying to "educate" your father isn't respectful and is most often unproductive.

More specifically, the one line you stuck in (was this the therapist's idea?), "Look, I was here for X amount of time, and I explained to you..." seems unnecessary and unproductive. It rings of negativity and connotes, *Well, I told you. It's your problem if you can't handle it.* Aside from being unproductive, it's disrespectful and perhaps a violation of *kibbud av v'eim*.

Additionally, telling your father at six o'clock, "I said I'm leaving at six..." sounds somewhat degrading; he's your father, not a little boy. If you want to make it clear that you'll be leaving at six, then aside from clarifying it in advance as you did, perhaps remind him respectfully at 5:45 in a calm voice, "I have another 15 minutes, Tatty; I have to leave at six. Let's see what we can still accomplish in this time. I'd love to do whatever I can."

Even at six, when you do need to go, it won't hurt to say, "I'd love to stay longer, but I need to go." And go. By telling him in advance, before it's emotionally challenging and relevant, and then by following through, you've set yourself up for a pleasant visit and a peaceful parting. When he sees that you had a plan and it actually happened, he'll be able to come to terms with it, even if this may take a few times to penetrate.

In my book, *Getting Along with Everyone*, I talk about using the BIFF formula—be Brief, Informative, Friendly, and Firm in challenging situations. *Brief* and *Informative* mean sticking to the point that needs to be communicated in a brief manner, only mentioning the facts that need to be shared. Any side explanations are unnecessary and will only complicate matters. *Friendly* is the tone and *Firm* is the confidence and clarity that underlie the message. If you give over the message this way instead of trying to change your father, I think he'll change a



lot faster on his own, especially with the consistency and respect in your approach and attitude.

Sometimes, people run after you because you're running away from them. The more you resist, the more they'll come back to you for more. When you give them what they need before they ask, be it emotional or technical help, they won't feel the need to take as much from you.

3 Make it work

You feel that minimizing your time at your parents' home is a way of brushing the issue under the rug. I respectfully disagree. Not everything in life has a neat solution, and there are situations that are best dealt with by avoiding them. I'm not condoning the ostrich approach to life's challenges, but there are times when the best way to deal with something is to stay away from it.

Sidestepping the candy store isn't necessarily the lazy way out. As much as you want to teach your child not to demand whatever catches their eyes, sometimes, staying away from temptation is the best way to deal with it, in the same way the Torah suggests that a *nazir* stay away from a grapevine. Leave the struggle for when it's necessary, as there will be more than enough challenges they will have to deal with in life.

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Visiting your parents a bit less can sometimes be helpful not only in avoiding stressful situations, but even in keeping up the relationship without the burnout and resentment that may come from doing much more. And when you do visit, remember to clarify your availability and schedule in advance, and do interject those friendly reminders I mentioned before it's time to go.

4 Don't do unto others...

I would want to address the parent here, but I'm trying to stick to addressing the writer, so I'll phrase it this way:

When you get older, please remember how you're feeling now. Without conscious effort, many people fall into the same tendencies they resented years before. Children mature and grow up gradually, and without being aware of the changing stages, you can find yourself parenting your little boy who's already 20. Yes, he's still your son who's obligated to be *mechabed* his parents, but he's in a different league already.

In case you think this will never happen to you, I'll explain to you why it takes a lot of inner work to make sure you keep the right boundaries. As a rule, parents see their children as extensions of themselves much more than children see themselves as extensions of their parents. Often, people want their children to please them and do things as they expect or as they taught them, while they don't do the same for their own parents. In their mind, this makes sense, because "why would I need to do things their way? I'm an adult!" Somehow, they don't realize that their own children have also grown into adulthood.

In general, one needs to make sure that advancing in age doesn't make them feel more entitled. They say there are two types of people who walk into a room: one says, "Here I am!" and the other says, "There you are!" I don't think it's so black and white, and it's fine to see both oneself and others, but only with some introspection and self-awareness can one realize how it looks from the other side, whether with their own children or anyone else.

By implementing the changes I've outlined above, I hope your visits and your relationship with your father will improve, ultimately bringing peace and joy to both of you.



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

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

