OUT OF SIGHT, FRONT OF MIND

THE ADULT CHILD–PARENT/IN-LAW RELATIONSHIP

New message

To: rabbigruen@thevoiceoflakewood.com

Subject: personal experience

You mentioned that people see things differently at different stages of life. Growing up, children may see things a certain way, but when they become a parent, they see things in a completely different light.

I thought it would be so simple to "do it right" (unlike my parents) when my turn came to marry off my children. Now that I reached this stage and see how challenging it is, I want to stress how important it is to keep the following points in mind:

1. Please, parents, try to maintain a good relationship with your *mechutanim*, even if it means giving in a lot. You're not doing this for them, you're doing it for your child and their spouse.

2. Even if you do have some disagreements, please leave your kids out of it. It gets extremely heavy and uncomfortable for your kids to be stuck between the two sets of parents who can't get along. (I'm not even talking about how it can affect their *shalom bayis*.)

3. Please never ask your child to keep something a secret from their spouse and/or in-laws (just because you hid some information before the shidduch and fear the ramifications).

Send

RABBI GRUEN'S TAKE

Agree

PEACE AT ALL COSTS

You have my wholehearted agreement when it comes to the first two points. Establishing and maintaining a good relationship with your *mechutanim* is so important. Parents of married children should never involve the children in any conflict between the two sets of parents, and if possible, the children shouldn't even know about it. Aside from avoiding conflict, it's so important to invest energy to build and maintain a respectful relationship with *mechutanim*, even if it's difficult. Remember: there are children and grandchildren who can be impacted in a big way if a fight erupts.

There's the typical stuff, like making sure to attend each other's *simchos*, and then there are the more challenging or stressful situations that require a lot more inner strength to deal with effectively. In many cases when one feels that the "other side" is being less consider-



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ate, it's well worth bending over backward to avoid conflict. Often, the subject of disagreement relates to the children and grandchildren, and inevitably, only one side can win. It's up to you to decide if you want to be the winner or you'd rather score a real win by giving in. Aside from doing it for peace, which is huge, it's worth doing so for the sake of the children.

As you pointed out, just venting or discussing the issues with the children can be very damaging. Aside from the clear violation of *lashon hara*, which should be more than enough to make us control ourselves, I've seen people make the mistake of assuming that when pointing out to their child where the *mechutanim* are wrong, their child or even child-in-law will surely side with them or at least won't be offended. Interestingly though, that's often not the case.

Often, hearing bad things about one's parents or in-laws will put a child on the defensive. In a conflict, one side isn't usually 100 percent right. By stating your side, you're pressing their buttons and egging them on to stick up for the bit where the other side may be right.

All this is in addition to the internal conflict between the couple that's stuck in the middle, which is often caused by such comments and conversations. Even when your child agrees with your perspective, their spouse might not see it that way.

Expressing your feelings may lead to a conflict on many levels, which gets very hard to untangle once it progresses. By holding your tongue, you can maintain peace in the family and avoid so much negativity.

Disagree

CLASSIFIED INFORMATION

Telling a child to keep a secret may be the wrong thing to do. However, the idea of total transparency is often equally dangerous.

The mishnah in *Avos* tells us regarding sharing information with one's wife, "Don't speak excessively with a woman." The Bartenura explains that this means that certain things are better left under wraps. Whether the information is negative or just challenging to absorb, resisting sharing the information can be the best route to follow. As stressful as it is to not share certain information, having an open-mouth policy can be equally or even more dangerous at times.

For a parent to tell a child that they can't share something with a spouse is generally wrong. If they feel that the information is better left unsaid, they can suggest that the child be cautious with the information and only share after verifying that it's okay and perhaps discussing it with the right person. Keeping a secret from a spouse is a risky thing to do, and dictating such a thing is generally stepping into private territory.

When it comes to a child vis-à-vis their in-laws, sometimes the relationship isn't as strong as you'd want it to be, and then silence may be warranted. Your child is young and might not always know or under-

stand the difference between which relationships are close enough to trust with everything and which need a bit more caution. Therefore, lumping a spouse and in-laws together in the same set of instructions (regarding secret keeping) isn't a great idea. Before your child gets married, it may be easier to suggest what you feel should or shouldn't be shared, but once they're married, it's probably best not to get involved.

What you can do, however, is not share something you don't want passed on further. If you can't hide it, how can you expect others to do so? Of course, some things you can't hide, like a medical condition, but you'd be surprised to notice how many things weren't important to share in the first place, especially at the risk of having it passed on.

When you open your mouth to speak, you are, by definition, handing over that information into the hands of the listener. As much as you may want or need to share that information, if you think something won't be beneficial for your child to tell their spouse or in-laws, it's often best not to tell the child either.

I would add...

KEEP THE PAWNS OFF THE BOARD

Another point I'd like to stress to parents who are in a conflict with their *mechutanim*: never use children as pawns or monkeys-in-the-middle. If you haven't managed to avoid conflict, at the very least keep it between you and the *mechutanim*. Don't ever use the children as "human shields." And certainly don't mess with something that your children seem fine with in the name of helping them stick up for themselves. Statements like "Look, they didn't give you what they promised, so how can you go to them for Yom Tov?" or "It really doesn't make sense to do *XYZ*. Tell your in-laws that it won't work for you" are extremely damaging.

By the same token, when children don't get along with one set of parents, the other set of well-meaning parents shouldn't make themselves into pawns as they try to help them make peace. Getting involved in order to help children smooth out the relationship is admirable. However, extreme care must be taken so that whatever is said or done is to the benefit of everyone involved and never causes hard feelings to either side or oneself. Even the best intentions may bring people to do the wrong things, causing more harm than good.

Resolving this conflict is a delicate tightrope walk, and it may be wisest to stay off the battlefield altogether. Gently referring the young couple to a third party may be the wisest way to go. Once the parents give that gentle suggestion, it's often best to move on and not follow up. It's not in the parents' control, nor is it their responsibility to make sure that it works out the way they feel is best.

This reminds me....

WORDS OF THE WISE

Reading this letter reminded me of a meeting I had with a *chassidishe* Rebbe about a couple who was struggling with their *shalom bayis*. He told me how saddened he was by the fact that, according to his perspective, the couple's difficulties weren't that great and would have easily been resolved if not for their parents' involvement. Although these *mechutanim* may have gotten along well before, as soon as certain issues came up between the couple, they took sides. This, of course, added fuel to the fire, with the husband and wife now sticking up for their respective parents. An issue that could have been dealt with privately between the couple became a conflagration of conflicts, with each conflict feeding off the other.

Then he shared something personal with me. This prominent Rebbe, a scion of royal lineage, didn't give the *kibbudim* under the *chuppah* to members of his distinguished family when marrying off his children. Once he had *mechutanim*, he honored them instead of his brothers or other relatives who were Rebbes and *rabbanim* in their own right. He told me he knows that people wonder about this, but he feels it's important to do so. "I want my children to see how I revere their parents-in-law. That way, they will honor them as well."

I was amazed by his understanding of what's truly important as well as the effects of how his actions and behaviors ripple on to his children. Telling your children to be respectful to their in-laws is far less convincing than showing them how you respect them yourself. People emulate actions more than they heed education.



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.

