OUT OF SIGHT, FRONT OF MIND

THE ADULT CHILD–PARENT/IN-LAW RELATIONSHIP

QUESTION:

In the recent article about different grandparenting styles and the tension created by that dichotomy, there was a point that wasn't brought up. One set of grandparents is an endless stream of Chanukah and *afikoman* presents, games, trips, and nosh, while the other is the opposite, and this affects the grandchildren. But then there's the adult piece.

My parents are always offering support and help, a constant safety net we can always fall back on. My in-laws' approach is focused on independence. The whole concept of helping married children is foreign to them.

My in-laws and parents both live in Lakewood, and the difference is stark. For example, while my parents are thrilled to have us every Shabbos, it seems that our family is too much for my in-laws, and they rarely host us.

My husband feels embarrassed and resentful that his parents don't—or can't—keep up. In his more cynical moments, he sees my parents' generosity as bribery, a constant bid to win some imaginary popularity contest.

How can I navigate these obvious differences? How can I explain it to my kids and husband in a way that breeds understanding and acceptance instead of resentment and entitlement?

Your thoughts on not taking responsibility for others' feelings, perceptions, and resentments really resonated with me. As a classic people-pleaser, taking others' emotional temperature is a constant and instinctive act. I can't feel okay when others aren't. I would love to hear practical tips on detaching from others' emotional states and not taking responsibility for their feelings.

RABBI GRUEN RESPONDS:

It's all connected

As the letter writer mentions, we already discussed this topic in a previous article, and anything I'm going to explore here is in continuation and addition to the previous article.

The first thing I'll touch on is what you refer to as the "children piece" and the "adult piece." You seem to see it as two separate issues. It's important to realize that children's issues affect adults, and adult issues affect children. It's all really one big mix, more than we think.

Parents like it when their children get treats and prizes. Of course, they don't want them to be spoiled, and sometimes they don't like how it's done, but in general, parents enjoy when their children are getting attention and gifts, and they like seeing their children happy. They also like when their children feel good about going to their grandparents.

And it's not just about the children feeling good. As parents, you also have feelings about it. Maybe it makes things easier for you when they're taken care of, or in general, you're calmer when your children are happy. It's important to be honest with yourself about your



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own interests in your children's feelings, as their feelings affect you.

On the flip side, children notice when their parents feel good. They see when things are easier for the family, like when they have a place to go for Shabbos or extra money for a *simchah*.

In life, we have to see the bigger picture and understand how everything is connected. It's a mistake to think these types of things are separate.

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I'll point out where this is relevant. Sometimes parents don't realize that they need to thank their parents for their help. When grandparents take the kids out, they feel it's between the grandparents and the kids and that once the children expressed their appreciation, it's all good. But there's more to it. Calling to say, "Thank you so much, my kids had a great time," is one thing, but it's also important to acknowledge that your parents made it easier for you personally, and they're often waiting to hear that.

Similarly, the same goes for when grandparents give money to the parents for a *simchah* or invite the family for Shabbos. It's good for children to thank their grandparents, even if the benefit wasn't specifically or directly for them. For example, at a *simchah* for which the grandparents helped out financially, the bar mitzvah boy or *chosson* and *kallah* can thank the grandparents for their part in the celebration. This kind of appreciation helps everyone feel good and makes the family relationships stronger.

Seeing the "children part" and the "adult part" as one big, connected entity often gives clarity on how to address things.

Finally, never assume that your attitude toward your parents or in-laws doesn't roll over onto the children. They pick up on it by osmosis, and that's why it's so important to work things out and resolve any hard feelings. The atmosphere at home will almost always be affected by it. Don't think you'll put on a good show for the kids and they won't realize how you feel. They feel it, and subconsciously, they're affected by it. As mentioned earlier, they want their parents to be happy, and they're slowly influenced by how the "adult part" affects you.

The adult piece

Just like the two sets of grandparents are treating the children in different ways, they're treating you, the adults, in differing ways too.

You call your in-laws' approach "focused on independence." It's important to see things in a good light. It's easy to paint others as selfish or lazy, and it's great that you choose to view them as principled. I think you're right. Everyone has their own way of doing things, and most people mean well and believe in whatever approach they take, regardless of why.

Seeing people's approach in a good light is important both when they give as well as when they don't.

It's known that we're living in a generation of entitlement. Even today's parents are part of the *"es kumt mir"* mindset, and our children pick up on this outlook. Sadly, it's become normal to expect parents to give, help, and do more than they do, and whatever parents provide is seen as a given. When you drop the entitlement and see your parents as people you should honor, give to, and not expect to get from, you'll be less concerned by their hands-off approach.

Seeing parents' attitudes in a good light is important for the parents who give a lot too. It's important to know how to take properly.

You might think, *If they're giving me, why wouldn't I take it well?* But you'd be surprised.

I was talking to a *chosson* who had issues with his parents. In the conversation, I asked him, "Do you realize how much your parents did for you; how much they invested in your success?"

His answer astounded me. He said, "Of course they did. They didn't want a failure for a son." He didn't see it as reason to be thankful. "They did it for themselves, not for me."



It's sad how someone could take something so beautiful and so badly distort and misinterpret it.

We often overcomplicate things. When everything is attached to layers of implications and motives, it's no wonder that even receiving becomes complex. There are people who resist receiving anything, even from their closest family members, just because of this. They worry what it might say about them, what they might owe the giver, what it implies about the relationship, etc.

Don't overthink it or assume their gifts mean something else or there's an obligation or a hidden agenda. If you have a set of parents who gives, accept graciously and show your appreciation.

See those who give less and those who give more in a good light and avoid overcomplicating your relationships.

Don't explain

Your question was about how to explain things to your husband and kids. Don't.

Explanations are by definition logical, and the topic you're addressing is about emotions. When you try to explain emotional things, aside from the fact that you won't be successful, you'll often just emphasize the problem. The difference between your parents' and in-laws' styles might be noticed anyway, but with less emphasis on what's happening, it'll be less of an issue.

Instead of trying to make sense out of things, show a good attitude toward everyone and speak nicely about everyone. That attitude trickles down.

There are always enough good things that should be emphasized, and that's where the focus should be. Usually, the less attention you give to the differences between the grandparents' attitudes, the less your children will think about it.

Similarly, when a child does bring up the issue of how different their grandparents are from each other, not too differently from the way he might talk about how different this year's *rebbi* is from last year's, don't make the mistake of going into long explanations about the right way to see it and how he's wrong for even thinking like that. You're often unknowingly emphasizing the issue even more. Usually, over time, if you give less attention to the differences and exude a good attitude to those around you, subtly pointing out nice things about both sets of grandparents, the children will absorb that message.

Detaching vs. apathy

The final part of your question is how you can detach when others don't feel okay. I think the part of the difficulty associated with this issue is that it's not reasonable to ask someone not to care about something they naturally care about. It's like when someone who can't handle a mess at home is told to stop caring about cleanliness.

But detaching doesn't mean not caring. It means accepting.

Hashem was kind enough to give the world a lot of kind, considerate, empathetic individuals. These people are wonderful and naturally care about others and their feelings. That's how it should be. The opposite of codependency—unhealthy ownership of others' emotional states—is not apathy.

Not only are you not responsible for controlling everyone's happiness or obligated to come up with ways to please those you love and care about, you're not capable of it

The opposite of codependency, and a mindset to help you with it, is simply acknowledging your limitations. Not only are you not responsible for controlling everyone's happiness or obligated to come up with ways to please those you love and care about, you're not capable of it. People who think they are exhaust themselves by trying to accomplish what isn't in their ability.

When you acknowledge this reality, you accept it and detach, not because you don't care—you do—but because there's only so much you can do. Caring doesn't mean taking responsibility. It means taking advantage of the healthy opportunities we have to make others happy and feeling good about the nice things we can do for others.

Even after you acknowledge your limitations in this area, you'll still find many opportunities to make your spouse, children, and both sets of parents feel good.



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.