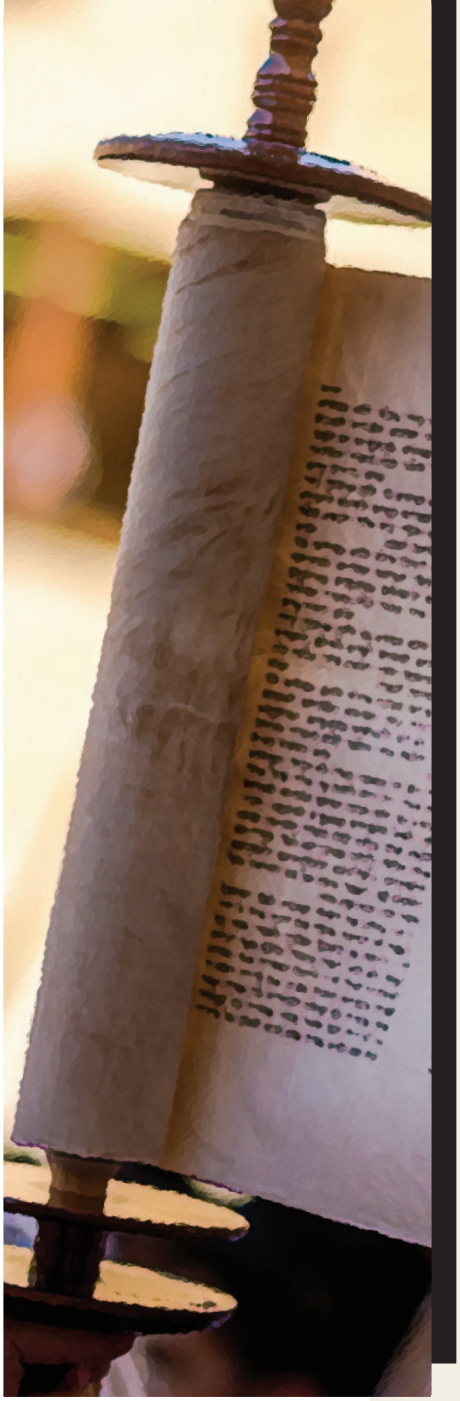


RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

THE SEGULAH OF HEALTHY CONNECTIONS

Sefer Shemos begins with the words: "*Va'eileh shemos*—And these are the names..." According to the Kli Yakar, the letter "*vav*" at the start of the *passuk* is the "letter of life," a letter that connotates attachment and connection, which hints at the *middos hayesod* and the purity of a Jewish life. The Bnei Yissachar explains that *shalom, achdus*, and keeping far from *machlokes* are a *tikkun* for all *aveiros* including any damage to purity, which is why the Kli Yakar notes that in the merit of being united and pure, Am Yisrael was *zocheh* to leave Mitzrayim.

Being personally involved in *machlokes* or sowing division between other people causes tremendous damage; conversely, taking care to maintain peace and harmony between people is a tremendous *segulah*. The benefits of *shalom* are felt in all areas of life, both in matters *bein adam leMakom* and *bein adam lechaveiro*, and we should never stop striving for greater unity among Yidden.

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Parshas
Shemos
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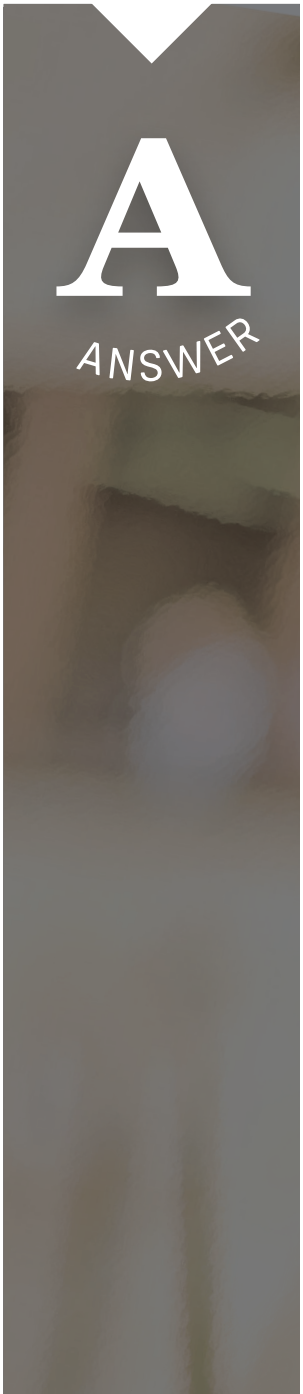


Thank you for your very helpful *shiurim*. I hope that you can help me with a personal question.

I am a young man who has been married for just over a year. My parents-in-law are very controlling people, and they shout at my wife and tell her what to do, treating her like a small child. Sometimes, they even shout at me.

Whenever this happens my wife just does what she's told, but I get very upset and don't know what to do about it. After all, moving far away from them in our second year of marriage is a very hard thing to do.

Looking forward to your answer, thank you



Being in a situation where someone is shouting at you and trying to dictate your actions is definitely very challenging and upsetting, and knowing how to respond to people who seem to be trying to control you is important in many relationships, not just those with one's in-laws. When it comes to parents or in-laws, however, it's doubly important to make sure you know what to do — and what not to do.

The *mitzvah* of *kibbud av va'eim* applies throughout our lives, no matter how old the parents and children are. That's why the first step in any such situation is to consult with your rav, to find out what you must do, what you may do, and what you are forbidden to do. Anything I suggest should only be considered once you have verified that you are dealing responsibly with the relevant halachic aspects. Furthermore, once a person consults with his rav and follows his guidance, he has nothing to fear, even if the parents or in-laws object or claim that the guidance is wrong or mistaken.

Another disclaimer is that while any issue of "control" needs to be dealt with responsibly, I sincerely believe that for the most part, parents do not have bad intentions and those who are violating their children's boundaries or intruding into their business don't mean to cause pain or harm. This does not justify any wrongdoing, but it does put things into perspective in terms of how to judge the situation and the people involved.

One final introductory point is that in most cases, it's not what you do or say, but how you do it. Some children are more outspoken about what bothers them and still manage to have their words taken well, while others are far more reticent and yet the reaction to their words is less positive. Whenever dealing with something as sensitive as this, the emphasis should be on how you approach the problem as much as what you end up doing.

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While of course children of any age must always take the greatest of care to be respectful to parents regardless of how strained a relationship becomes, parents of married children should know, and should be told if they don't, that interfering in their married children's lives is unacceptable and wrong. It is never appropriate to try to control another person, even if you see them making a mistake (and don't we all make them?), and this applies even when there's no screaming involved. As in any other area of life, boundaries must be clear and everyone should respect them. This is even more critical when meddling disturbs the *shalom bayis* of

the couple. In such a case, children are fully entitled to very respectfully tell their parents that their (perhaps unintentional) interference is doing actual damage, and to ask that this be taken into consideration to prevent the parent-child relationship from suffering as a result.

This applies to any parent-child relationship, even in cases where the parents are financially supporting their children, or have purchased an apartment for them, and so forth. While it may be tempting to assume that one can purchase the right to control, it is wrong to try to do so and wrong to justify attempts to control and dictate other people's decisions or actions.

While it seems true that a generation ago, married children were much less likely to dare to protest any meddling on the part of their parents, that doesn't mean that today's married children are obligated to put up with something that is so wrong and damaging. And even if you suffered from your own parents' meddling in the early years of your own marriage but now "realize that they only had the best intentions" etc., that still doesn't entitle you to do the same.

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Given that it is so harmful to control another person, it's very rarely advisable for the person on the receiving end to submit to the other person's efforts to control. In fact, simply demonstrating — again, as respectfully as possible — that you will no longer allow yourself to be controlled can itself improve the situation. No one should enable another person to act incorrectly, and while being *mevater* can be very commendable in many areas in life, in such a case it is generally not the best option. (This is what you will likely hear from *daas Torah*, from a Rav who can guide you in the particulars of your situation, which you may often be too subjective to assess properly on your own.)

That said, as in any challenging relationship issue, it's important to keep things in proportion and recognize the areas where a parent *is* controlling as well as other areas where they are *not*. People very often allow one particular problem to dominate an entire relationship (sometimes understandably, because it is so disturbing), without realizing that the issue is actually quite limited in its scope. For instance, parents might try to control a certain aspect of their children's finances but allow them to do their own thing in other areas. Or, they might try to control certain decisions, but they are still very generous with their time, money, offers to babysit, and so forth.

Even if a parent or in-law causes a great deal of frustration with either blatant or subtle efforts to control you, there's still no reason to let the entire relationship deteriorate. If the parents are keeping the lines of communication open, you should certainly not be the one to break them off. As far as possible, you should do whatever you can to stay on the best of terms, while treading very carefully in trouble-spots. Sometimes, when a parent sees that a child who has expressed his distress at control issues is still very respectful in general, and is trying his best to observe the *mitzvos* of *kibbud av va'eim*, this itself can improve the situation.

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Another point to keep in mind is ensuring that you and your spouse are on the same page, and stay there. If you're both in agreement that something has to be done about either set of parents, that makes it easier to decide what to do. But it's important to remain sensitive to the fact that at the end of the day, however much a child may know that their parents' behavior is problematic, they're still parents, and it doesn't feel good to hear anyone, even your spouse, speak negatively about them. The fact that you agree about how to deal with the issue can make it more tempting for you to disparage the parents to your spouse, but if they're his or her parents, this could easily backfire. Instead, tell your spouse: "I know your parents don't really mean to... and it's just that it's really hard for me when..." If your spouse doesn't agree with your perception, you can add, "It could be that you're right and that I'm not seeing things in the same light as you are. Is there anything we can do about this, that would help both of us?"

The stress should be on you and your spouse addressing things together in order to reach a positive outcome for everyone involved.

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When you do finally address your parents or in-laws, it's vital to be respectful and to remain focused on your own feelings, rather than accusing anyone else of doing things wrong. Use phrases such as, "I get very upset when I'm told that I *have to* do something..." or "I find it very difficult to listen to suggestions when I'm constantly asked whether I took the advice, and I keep hearing how wrong it would be to do otherwise." The same method can be used when talking about how you feel when someone raises their voice at you or belittles you, your opinions, and values.

It's very important that you are totally clear. Don't hint at things, hoping that the other person will get the message without you having to spell it out. They might not get the message, or they might get a message you didn't intend.

You may certainly say, "I would very much appreciate it if you would allow us to make our own decisions. I value your input and suggestions, although I find it very challenging when I'm told what I must do."

When you express yourself gently, without accusations or recriminations, you should have no need to fear the response, whatever it is.

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You should also be very clear about what you are hoping will happen next. If your goal is to shut your parents or your in-laws out of your life (which is almost always very wrong and misguided), don't expect things to look pretty. But don't assume that your parents or in-laws know what you are trying to achieve. Even if you don't want to distance yourself from them, they may think that's precisely what you're aiming for.

Therefore, take care to reassure them that your goal is to improve the relationship, not damage, or worse, terminate it. Tell them clearly, again and again, how much you want to fix things between you, how much you are grateful for having them in your life, and how much you want them to be a continued presence. Then add, "If it's possible to be careful about xyz, that would make a huge difference and we would appreciate it so much."

Sometimes, parents become automatically less controlling once they realize that their married children really do want a good relationship. Trying to impose their decisions on married children can be viewed as a way to keep them close (however unwise), especially in this day and age when the younger generation so often considers itself wiser and better educated in all areas.

In families where newly-married sons or daughters frequently turn to their parents for advice on life-issues, control issues arise less frequently. If a young couple is wise, they will ask for advice even when they don't feel they need it (though they may actually!) and give their parents the wonderful feeling of passing wisdom down the generations (even if they don't end up implementing the advice, something that very often doesn't need to be made known!).



If, on the other hand, a married son or daughter gives their parents the impression that they are self-sufficient and simply don't "need" them any longer, whether because their advice and guidance is outdated, or because they simply have other people to ask if they need to, the likelihood that the parents will feel alienated and respond by trying to intervene by force is far greater. Be wise, and don't fall into this trap.

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In theory, no article on parents-in-law would be complete without a good *shvigger* joke… but by now it's hopefully clear that joking on such a sensitive matter is usually inappropriate and not so funny after all. We all know that stereotypes about mothers-in-law are just that, stereotypes, but sometimes, if we aren't careful, we can end up viewing our in-laws through an "in-law" lens rather than seeing them as typical well-meaning and extremely caring individuals with their good and less-good points, just like anyone else.

Unless your situation is truly problematic, allow your in-laws to be part of your life, seek out their advice, welcome their input, and then thank them.

I recently invited people to give input on what they feel children and parents can benefit from hearing, and an article like this shows the need for clarity on both ends. There's so much that parents would love their married children to hear, and vice versa. If you have anything to share from either side of this relationship, or both, please feel free to submit your thoughts and hopefully they will be shared with others for the benefit of all *iy"H*.

May Hashem help us to appreciate all the people in our lives, distance ourselves from *machlokes*, and utilize the wonderful *segulos* of *shalom* and *achdus* to improve our relationships and benefit all of Klal Yisrael.

TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME: SHEMOS 5784

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