

THE THERAPISTS' PERSPECTIVE

The Couch

MODERATOR: ELCHANAN SCHWARZ LMHC

Dear Therapist,

My husband and I recently became estranged from our daughter. She is angry at us for what she perceives we have done her wrong. She was able to convince her brother, with whom we had good relations till then, that we are people who should be avoided.

Both my daughter and my son forbade their children from having contact with me and my husband. I used to have very close relationships with both families, and I am bereft that this is happening to us.

I tried with rabbis and therapists to meet with them and clear the air, but they refuse.

I love my grandchildren and they loved me. I am at a loss. Please suggest.

*Esther Gendelman, MS,
LPC*

THERAPIST IN A PRIVATE PRACTICE
IN TOMS RIVER, NJ. (248-915-9122).
COAUTHOR OF "THE MISSING PEACE"
AWINDOWWITHIN@GMAIL.COM

This is probably one of the most painful and tragic outcomes that can happen to a family unit. As such by bringing it up, you are benefiting anyone who might be in a similar situation or considering this course of action.

Parents spend so much time, effort and resources caring for their children and so deeply want to maintain that precious lifelong connection. To be shut out of your child's life and to miss out on seeing the grandchildren grow is a form death while still alive. It sounds like you are powerless to change the status quo at this time because your daughter and now your son have rejected any efforts to sit down and work through this even with rabbis and or therapists.

Perhaps, the only answer is to focus your efforts on what you can do. Get support for your trauma. By working through your emotional pain, you will hopefully reach a place where you might be able to understand your daughter's perception and accept it as her emotional reality right now. In that way, you can experience deep compassion for yourself and for her.

No parents are perfect. All our children will feel hurt at some points when we miss their cues. Yet, Hashem designed the world giving children to imperfect human beings who are still growing and developing as we raise the next generation. In the vast majority of cases, parents truly love their children and are doing the best they can to care for them. And, children only have one set of parents and rejecting them is also rejecting a part of themselves.

Shalom in the greater family unit is the ultimate *brocha* and the healthy solution for both parents and children. There is a lot of hope that therapists alienate parents from children. I can only speak for

myself and colleagues that I know and respect. Helping people arrive to a healthy place where they can make healthy choices does not result in alienation but improved healthier relationships with genuine and authentic communication. The more emotionally healthy people are, the more capable they are of giving and receiving love. Only in some extreme cases, where there is toxic abuse will *rabbonim* suggest separation.

Sometimes, giving people a space of time to let them know you love them and are happy to listen without judgment to them when they are ready can be healing. Instead of desperately trying to push mediation, perhaps send this type of message that you will be there with open ears and open arms when she is ready to listen.

I wish you and your family the ultimate *brocha* of *shalom* and Shlomo Hamelech's wisdom of allowing your face to reflect unconditional love and in doing so becoming a mirror for your daughter to feel and mirror in return.

Ronen Hizami, MD

BOARD CERTIFIED CHILD, ADOLESCENT
AND ADULT PSYCHIATRIST IN PRIVATE
PRACTICE

Thanks for raising this important question.

Your question is absolutely dripping with pain. There are few things more painful than feeling that one's adult child(ren) is rejecting them, keeping the grandkids away from them. When young children or teens defy their parents, it is easier to accept. Some kids are easier. Some are more difficult. There are stages of development that are more prone to this type of behavior. There is a general expectation that as our children become adults and begin their own families, that there will be a deepening of the relationship. A maturity develops. They can finally understand the parent perspective.

Parents are easy targets. It's the oldest game in town. Blame your parents for all that is wrong in your life. Sometimes, the parents deserve some of the



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blame. Parental pathology can have profound effects on their children's development. It can be as simple as a personality mismatch, and as severe as parents abusing their children. In most cases it is not black and white. In the case of a parent with a personality disorder, the children just don't have a chance.

Some parents just can't get it right. It is just never enough. Some children, of various ages, can be unreasonable in their demands. They can be incredibly entitled. They view their parents as little more than ATM machines, a necessary evil to help them attain what they want. The minute the parents can no longer feed the lion, the lion can attack.

Pathology in the children can be just as responsible. Severe pathology in kids can make parenting them an impossible task. Reasonable interventions during childhood can be looked back at as abusive.

The psychotherapy process can have many stages. In some modalities, as the patients look back at their childhood, they may feel some anger towards their parents. They can feel mistreated. They may also feel that their parents didn't protect them from various ills.

I have personally been involved in several cases just like you describe. The underlying issues have been mixed. In almost every case, there were fundamental problems in the relationship that finally exploded. In several cases, a misguided therapist contributed to the family schism.

There is nowhere near enough information in your question to offer a response. How many children do you have? Have all your children rejected you? The only advice I can offer is to speak with a seasoned family therapist and then consult with your *rov*.

Yehuda Lieberman,
LCSW

PSYCHOTHERAPIST IN PRIVATE PRACTICE, BROOKLYN, NY | FAR ROCKAWAY, NY; AUTHOR OF "SELF-ESTEEM: A PRIMER" WWW.YLCSW.COM, 718.258.5317

Sadly, I have witnessed too many families that have been torn apart. This can be due to relationships that are actually harmful to some or all of the people involved. Sometimes the problems caused are clear and obvious. At other times, they are perceived by part of the family. At yet other times no one in the family is able to recognize the harm that is being experienced (though it may be obvious to others).

Relationship issues can take various forms. Sometimes, people are hurt by others' actions that cause them physical harm. Sometimes the hurt is financial. And sometimes, people are hurt emotionally. When this last situation occurs, it can be difficult for those who are ostensibly inflicting this pain to understand the cause—or the pain itself.

When people feel psychological pain, the cause can often seem arbitrary. They may be reacting to something that would never cause us to feel hurt, yet they seem immeasurably distraught. While this may seem to be illogical, that's the nature of emotions. Emotions are caused by our unconscious mind—the part of our mind that reacts to associations, triggers, and insecurities. These are developed throughout childhood and adolescence, and reinforced throughout life.

Psychological pain within relationships is a two-way street. Although we may not understand the other person's pain (and may have trouble recognizing the causes), this doesn't make their pain any less real. There are certainly times when we are hurt by them, and they don't seem to understand what they

did wrong.

Often, we will grasp onto the most obvious explanation for our emotional pain, when this is only the symbolic trigger for a deeper pain. Within relationships, this can become reciprocal, causing the relationship to become harmful for both (or all) parties. Without understanding the causes of our own pain—and that of the others within the relationship, healing can be difficult or impossible.

Marriage counseling, for instance, often evolves into a combination of joint therapy along with individual therapy for each person. This allows each one to better understand his or her own and the other's unconscious triggers and insecurities that lead to problematic communication.

Sadly, your family is now fractured, and you're in a position where you have little or no control over the actions of your children or grandchildren. There is little that you can do to convince them to change their minds. It certainly sounds like a good family therapist might be able to help. Hopefully they will be willing to give this a shot in the near future.

Chaim Neuhoff, Ph.D.

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

Ouch. This is an extremely painful ordeal to go through. When a child cuts you out of his or her life, it is very hurtful and can engender a range of feelings including shame, guilt and confusion.

It seems that you (and certainly I) are not clear what caused this. It is not unusual for parents to be somewhat confused. Often, these situations stem from a child's pain that becomes unnecessarily overblown to cause a full break of relations. Sadly, these situations are sometimes fueled by advice from relatives, friends, or even incompetent therapists. To correctly navigate these situations, one needs guidance from recognized and competent professionals in collaboration with Daas Torah.

Generally speaking, there are several reasons why these things happen. Sometimes adult children find fault in the "tough" way they were raised. They may not realize that they probably grew up when hitting and tough authoritative parenting was the normal and recommended approach. Similarly, many adult children don't feel that they were nurtured as they should have been. In previous generations, especially with holocaust survivors and their children, affection was rarely expressed verbally or physically. Instead, parents demonstrated their love for their children by taking care of them, deemphasizing a child's psyche or self-esteem. Additionally (and commonly), these situations can stem from arguments and misunderstanding related to money. Finally, adult children sometimes hold on to resentments over their parents' broken marriage, often blaming one parent. Related to this, the child's spouse can be the divisive factor. The spouse or parents may not approve of one another, forcing the child to choose between parents and spouse.

As mentioned, many of these decisions to totally cut off relationships stem from human weakness and bad advice and are not *l'fi ruach chachomim*, notwithstanding the genuine pain felt. However, there are situations where this may be necessary—at least for the short-term. Examples include situations of serious abuse in the past or ongoing present abuse or control from a parent.

In terms of dealing with the current situation, I can just share general recommended guidelines.

1) Realize that you didn't break the relationship: they did. You may have contributed to some underlying tension, but you are not responsible for the child's choice to end the relationship.

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Relief Corner

WHEN ADULT CHILDREN CUT OFF CONTACT

The topic of child estrangement is very painful, both for parents and for children. The parent-child bond is very powerful, and whatever the cause was for the estrangement, it most certainly reflects children who are in so much pain that they decided to cut off contact with their parents. Whose fault is it? That is a complicated question, and no two situations are alike. Without casting any blame, there are certain steps that parents can take to lay the groundwork for a future reconciliation.

Anger is Counterproductive

It is very natural to feel angry at your children for cutting you out of their life. Your anger might be especially aroused when you are not allowed to see your grandchildren who are victims of a situation that they have no role in. Nevertheless, when your children sense your anger, it will only drive them further away from you. Additionally, when you are angry, your logical brain becomes basically dysfunctional, and any attempt at self-reflection will be stopped in its tracks.

Listen

If your children reach out to you and want to explain to you why they felt a need to cut you out of their lives, just listen. You might completely disagree with your children's version of their life with you. However, setting the record straight in your eyes will only convince your children that they should cut off ties once again. Bear in mind, that even

if their claim is very exaggerated, there is probably a kernel of truth. If your child feels that their voice is being heard, the door to reconciliation has a greater chance of remaining open. Sometimes, being right is not constructive. This situation is one of those times.

Do Not Appeal to Their Emotions

You might have an urge to tell your children that they should reconcile because of all the pain that they are causing you. Although your point has a lot of merit, it is not helpful for estranged children to hear that from their parent. If they feel that you have been overbearing and abusive (whether this is true or not), playing the emotion card will only make them double down on their decision to maintain their distance.

Treat Your Child as An Adult

All parents struggle when their children transition from childhood to adulthood. At what point do you start treating your children as adults who are entitled to full autonomy in their decision making? Some parents will struggle with this for decades or even for their entire lives. When a child is estranged, it is extremely imperative to treat the child as an adult. Respect their right as an adult to make their own decisions even if you vehemently disagree. When children feel that you respect their boundaries, they are much more likely to remain in contact with you, despite any grievances

that they might have about the past.

Embrace Your Mistakes

As human beings, we have a very difficult time admitting any wrongdoing. Sometimes, estranged children have very legitimate complaints about how they were treated by their parents. There are two sides to every story, and it is not black or white. Nevertheless, if you can identify with your child's perspective and own up to your contribution to past mistakes, the chances for reconciliation are greatly increased.

Seek Professional Help

There are mental health professionals who have extensive training and experience in strained family relationships and estrangement. Sometimes, you have to go by yourself to learn the skills that you need to develop to mend your relationship with your child, and sometimes it is possible to attend the sessions with your child and start the process of overcoming the rift that has separated you from your child.

Family dynamics are complicated, and they encompass years and decades of interactions between multiple members of the family system. When there is a break in the family, it is not going to be easy to repair it. The process can be long and painful. However, if you are determined to have your child back in your life, then no matter how difficult the process is to you, it is most certainly worthwhile.

RELIEF

Relief resources is a non-profit organization whose mission is to provide access to the best mental health resources available. This is accomplished through Relief's highly-acclaimed referral service, where a trained referral specialist will help you navigate the process of finding the best resources for your particular need. For assistance, call 718.431.9501

2) Turn to others for support. Reach out to friends and family for *chizuk* and, if you can find an appropriate one, join a support group. Consider seeking Daas Torah support as well as a professional therapist.

3) Keep trying to take a step back and understand what led to this. What family patterns were present? Who can you speak with that may shed some light?

4) Keep reaching out to him and her and let them know that you love them and would like to repair whatever was broken. It may take several messages from a parent before a child agrees to work toward reconciliation. It is best to propose to get together for a low-stress occasion such as a dinner or to meet together with a trusted third party. If this is rejected, wait a while and try again. Stay on message that you are thinking about them and hope to make things better and reconnect.

5) If you do get the opportunity to meet, listen openly to their version of the facts. Even if they are totally wrong, perhaps you can find a kernel of truth. There will be a time to say your version of what happened, but don't squander the opportunity to allow the other side to get it out and feel deeply understood. Don't stand on ceremony: take your share of responsibility and apologize for it. If you are sincere and genuine, it will hopefully penetrate and allow them to also apologize and move on.

May you be *zoche* to the *brocha* of *Shalom*.

Mordechai Weinberger,
LCSW

AUTHOR OF "MASTERING RELATIONSHIPS" AND "ALIVE", AND RADIO HOST. TO HEAR RECORDINGS OF PREVIOUS RADIO PROGRAMS CALL 718-298-2011.

My heart goes out to you. Unfortunately, your question reflects what seems to be a ter-

rible pattern that is forming in Klal Yisroel, and if it not addressed in early stages, with collaboration between *rabbonim* and therapists, it can erode the very foundation of Torah life. I heard many times from my Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Pam *zt"l*, that Klal Yisroel was formed into a nation when we left Mitzrayim, and for that reason, the *Pesach seder* is one of the few *mitzvos* that is celebrated by Jews across the spectrum of observance. The strength in it is that *Pesach* is when we became a family. When we invited our neighbors to join with us to eat the *korban Pesach*, we were bound together as a family and a nation, and now, as then, *Pesach* is when we celebrate the bonds that tie us together. How is this bond to remain strong when at the very core (the relationship between parents and their children), at the nuclear family level, we see an unraveling?

Sadly, children sometimes have issues with parents. Sometimes the child is suffering from an emotional disorder, and sometimes the disorder is the parents. In either case, there are ways to work through these issues and maintain some form of contact. A trend is forming in which people are going to therapists and sharing their story, but only one side of it. The parent appears to be a toxic, destructive individual who needs to be kept away, lest his toxicity destroy the child. However, what happens when such an estrangement occurs is that it does more damage, rather than fostering the healing it is meant to accomplish.

A child develops through a secure, loving attachment with his parents. As children get older, they need less direct attachment and can stand on their own. However, they always know that they have their parents' support and backing. Through this safety and support, the child learns to branch out to other places. It enables him to develop trust in teachers, *rabbeim* -- even lawyers, doctors and accountants. He feels safe reaching out for help. It is a fundamental concept in psychoanalysis

and psychodynamics, two major branches of psychology, that a person learns how to interact with the world through his interactions with his parents.

Let's take an example in which a parent has a severe mental disorder, which is actively causing emotional harm to the child and grandchildren. In such a situation, the adult child needs to create boundaries with that parent. Disconnection is not the solution. Learning the skills of how to have an appropriate level of interaction -- even if it's as minimal as writing letters to each other -- is the most productive way of dealing with this situation. When a person severs a relationship with a parent, he is telling himself that there is a relationship that is integral to his make-up as a human being, which he will never be able to have in any shape or form. It is out of reach forever. In turn, he is teaching his own children that when a situation is too difficult, the solution is to disconnect instead of learning how to work things out.

On the other side of the argument, there is a concept sometimes, when someone is healing from a disease, he needs to be quarantined because he is vulnerable to harm. Likewise, when a relationship is damaging and a person is working on building up his emotional strength and health, he needs to temporarily stay away from those who stand to throw his progress into reverse. However, just as the aim of quarantine is to reintroduce the patient back into society once he is stronger, likewise in the case of emotional health, this kind of separation should be in force ONLY UNTIL HE IS ABLE TO INTERACT WITH THEM from a position of stability. In this case, the adult child is teaching his children that even when people are difficult and complicated, we can still find ways to respect them and include them in our lives.

The *mitzvah* of *kibud av v'eim* is so pivotal to Klal Yisroel, because the way we treat our parents the way we treat Hashem

and *rabbonim*. I've seen many times that in families where the parents speak ill of the *rov* or the *yeshiva*, the children struggle and sometimes fail to follow the path of Torah. It's simple. If we don't teach trust and respect, our children lose the ability to trust and respect. Disconnection should not be an option. Rather, it should be a seldom used, temporary accommodation to a drastic situation.

Unfortunately, you are in a situation in which some of your children has picked up this "estrangement virus." This is indeed a terrible pain and void. We know that Yaakov Avinu couldn't be consoled for his loss of Yosef because somewhere within him, he felt that Yosef was still alive. You know very well that your children are out there, alive and well and yet choosing to stay out of your life. This is a darkness that can only be fought with light. You have two choices: You can walk around feeling victimized, or you can choose to face your loss with strength. Be a light to the other people who are in your life. If you have other children, shine your love and warmth on them and their children. Enjoy what you have and focus on the positive. Never complain to your family about this situation; if you need to unburden yourself, do so with a therapist.

If you become bitter, the reunion you hope for may never happen, or it may fail because of the weight of guilt and repercussions. If you maintain a kind-hearted and happy approach to life, eventually some of your grandchildren will certainly seek you out on their own, even if your children never come around. And those grandchildren will wonder why they were deprived of an important source of love in their lives. I wish you and all the parents who are experiencing this difficult challenge the strength and *emunah* to persist, cope and ultimately find *shalom* and *nachas* in the family you've worked to build.