

FEATURE

A Close Call

I almost missed
repairing my
relationship with
my parents

By Rechy Frankfurter



In *AmiLiving* Issue #280, we published an article entitled “Shattered Hearts,” in which we first highlighted the phenomenon of children cutting themselves off from their parents. Since then, we have featured numerous letters and other articles about this tragedy. To those going through it, it is an excruciatingly painful and unrelenting experience, and it is only with great effort that these parents are able to put one foot in front of the other and focus on the *nachas* they *do* have. As one woman wrote to us, “I survived the Holocaust only to experience another one years later.” Granted, there are extreme situations in which such measures are warranted, but when it starts to become rampant—the late Rav Shlomo Gissinger, *zt”l*, referred to it as a “*mageifah*”—we need to examine if perhaps people are being too readily and irresponsibly encouraged to cut their parents off.

Recently, I was contacted by a woman who related that several years earlier she had severed her relationship with her parents on the advice of a therapist. She sobbed as she told me that she shudders to think of what might have happened had she not finally extricated herself from the therapist’s clutches and reconciled with them. Her father had recently passed away, and she was extremely grateful that they’d had a loving relationship for the last four years of his life. The purpose of her call? To shed light on her story. She wanted to warn others not to repeat her mistake.

What follows is my raw conversation with her. I have edited it only for clarity, so you can listen in for yourself.



What made you go for therapy?

It all started when my 17-year-old son was going through a difficult time. He had suffered a trauma. I was told to speak to Dr. Shimon Russell, who was living in Lakewood but now lives in Eretz Yisrael. He recommended that we use a different therapist, so we did, but that therapist said he couldn't help my son. The real problem, he insisted, had to do with me and my husband.

My husband is a wonderful person. We both have *chesronos*, of course, but we have *maalos* as well. There was nothing out of the ordinary in our home or in our marriage. My son had been traumatized by something out of the ordinary, but it didn't occur in the home. All of a sudden I found myself in therapy, where I was being led to believe that my marriage was the issue—and this really started to have an effect on it.

Then this therapist started telling me that I had to impose boundaries on my parents, which led to my causing them a lot of *agmas nefesh* for several years. Then one day I heard a lecture that made me realize that if I kept seeing this therapist, I was going to get divorced, and I also would never have a

relationship with my parents again. The therapist was destroying my life, but I managed to save myself in the nick of time.

Let's go back for a moment. You were having trouble with your son. What was going on at the time?

My son was acting out very badly. It's a *neis* that he is now okay and married to a wonderful girl.

You saw that he was slipping, but did you know about the trauma behind your son's behavior?

I had my suspicions.

When you went to the therapist to discuss your son's behavior, how did your marriage suddenly become the problem?

That's my whole point. You go to a therapist, and suddenly the problem you went for is turned into a different one, and it becomes either your marriage or your relationship with your parents or something else.

So the therapist said you needed marriage counseling and that he would

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**THIS THERAPIST HAD NEVER
EVEN MET MY FATHER, BUT HE
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INSTEAD OF CREATING
SHALOM, HE CREATED
NEGATIVITY.**

be your therapist?

Yes. My husband was very passive and didn't really join in, but I became hooked on it.

You felt that you had a normal marriage with normal issues. How was the therapist able to convince you otherwise?

When so much is going on and one of your children is going through a hard time, it's easy to blame your spouse, especially when there's a therapist who's pushing the idea that your marriage is at fault. And the truth is that my husband and I weren't on the same page as far as how to deal with our son, and the therapist was able to pick up on it.

What was his plan to fix your marriage?

I realized later that he wasn't trying to fix our marriage; he was goading me into getting divorced.

How much of an effect did that have on you?

I was on the brink.

What was your husband's reaction to all this?

He felt bad about everything, but as I said, he's passive by nature. Thinking back,

I can't believe we really could have gotten divorced. And to make matters worse, the therapist disapproved of my relationship with my parents and said it needed boundaries.

Had your husband ever had a problem with your relationship with your parents?

We always had a good relationship and he accepted them, even though it was sometimes difficult. My mother was definitely ahead of her time. I'm in my late 50s, and she was never a hater or a hollerer in an era when these things were very common. My father was tougher, but my mother could also be critical at times. I was the oldest child, so I was the one who always helped them and was *mechabed* them. Then I got "empowered" by my therapist to set boundaries. He pushed me into breaking off my relationship with my father.

Where did that come from?

When I mentioned that my father had disciplined my son, he told me this meant that my father had crossed a certain boundary that wasn't meant to be crossed. He convinced me to sever my relationship with him, which also meant that I couldn't talk to my mother, with whom I was very close.

Whenever I told the therapist about a



nice interaction I had with my parents, after which my father got upset about something and blew off some steam, instead of minimizing the incident, the therapist would blow it up and say how terrible it was. He would insist that I mustn't let my father into my house and that I had to show him who was boss. This therapist had never even met my father, but he diagnosed him with a personality disorder and anger management issues. Instead of creating *shalom*, he created negativity.

The same thing happened whenever I mentioned my husband. My husband is the nicest person in the world, but he's not a good communicator. Instead of building him up and talking about his positive traits, the therapist would magnify whatever was negative.

Did you speak to a *rav* before severing your relationship with your parents?

It was based entirely on the therapist, who claimed that he had sought *daas Torah* about my situation.

I was very addicted to the therapy, and I wouldn't have missed a week if you had paid me.

You never tried to make peace with your parents?

There were times when I tried to make peace

with my parents during the years when we weren't talking.

One year, my sister couldn't have my parents for Pesach because she wasn't well. My parents had always come to me, and she didn't know what to do, so she called her *rav* for advice. The *rav* called me and said, "I just spoke to your sister. I've known your father for many years and you aren't wrong for having a *taanah* against him, but you still have to ask him for *mehilah* even though it's hard." I told him that I would think about it, but I didn't do it right away.

Did you discuss it with your father?

No, because I was already "empowered," so I just lashed out at him.

What ended up happening that Pesach?

I apologized and my parents came to us for Yom Tov, but then some minor incident happened and I broke things off again. It was constantly on and off. Eventually I realized that this therapist was just taking my money and tying me to him with his charisma, but I was really in a downward spiral. I felt the therapist had cast a spell on me.

He was being manipulative?

Yes. Very much so. I was no longer thinking for myself.

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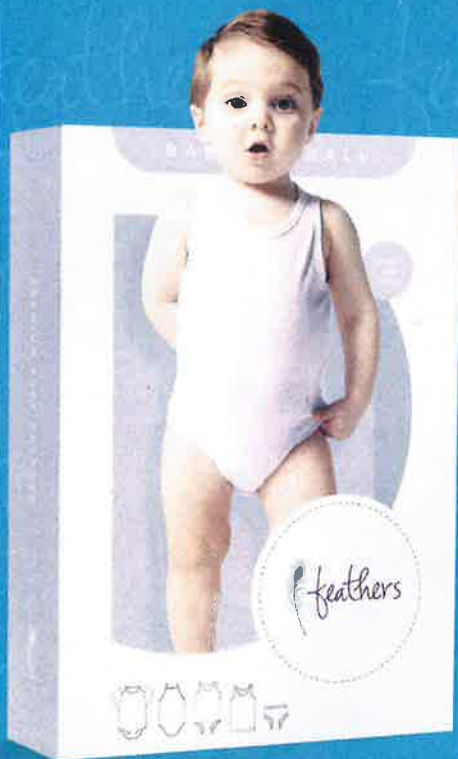
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“I STILL CRY WHENEVER I THINK ABOUT WHAT I DID TO MY PARENTS, ESPECIALLY TO MY FATHER.”

If he had such power over you and you were enmeshed with him, how were you able to break away?

What happened was that I went to hear a lecture with a friend, and the speaker spoke about how you can't pick and choose which *mitzvos* you want to keep. I realized that I was picking and choosing not to keep *kibbud av va'eim*, and it really bothered me.

By the way, the fact that the therapist was seeing me alone was also somewhat inappropriate. In the beginning my husband and I went to him together, but then he started seeing me alone. I knew that it was inappropriate, but the therapist was very convincing. After the lecture I called Rav Gissinger, who had made several attempts to reach out to me on behalf of my parents.

Rav Gissinger was trying to make *shalom* and you ignored him?

I didn't take his calls.

What happened when you called Rav Gissinger back?

He told me that he had been trying to reach me and that he felt very bad about the situation. I was close to him during the last few years of his life. In fact, he called me five days before he passed away about something else.

Anyway, Rav Gissinger said that he wanted me to go to a different therapist. It was very hard for me to break away from my therapist because I was so dependent on him, but the next time I went for a session, I had an epiphany. All of a sudden

I could see things objectively, and I couldn't believe what had happened to me. It was really *min baShamayim*. I told the therapist that this was going to be my last session with him. He was shocked. Rav Gissinger ended up sending me to another therapist, a woman.

Did the first therapist try to stop you from leaving?

He couldn't stop me. I just told him that I wasn't coming to him anymore. He was very surprised and said, "I think we have a lot more work to do." I said, "Maybe so, but I need a break from you right now."

When I told my new therapist about my experience, she had to give me therapy for my previous "therapy." She's a wonderful, *emesdike* person, and *baruch Hashem*, she was able to help me. I still cry whenever I think about what I did to my parents, especially to my father. Before then, I'd had my parents at my house every single Yom Tov for over 20 years.

It's a shame. If you go to a *sheitel macher* or a doctor and have a bad experience, you don't go back. But if you go to a therapist and you feel that something is wrong, you're already invested in the therapy and find it difficult to leave.

There needs to be a lot more transparency and accountability in the therapist's office. My father told me, "*Chochmah bagoyim ta'amin; Torah bagoyim al ta'amin.*" These days, we don't bat an eyelash when we hear people say, "My therapist said this," or "My therapist said that." Unfortunately,



Toras goyim has seeped into the therapist's office.

Did your parents try to reach out to you when you weren't speaking to them?

They did, but I was advised to be very strict and not talk to them; that's how "empowered" I was. I would have never acted like that if I wasn't in therapy.

What was your husband's take on all this?

He didn't agree with me, but he saw that

I was adamant, which really wasn't like me at all.

You said that your father was difficult. Did his behavior bother you before you started seeing the therapist?

I always loved him, but he wasn't very demonstrative, and he also had a temper. When a parent is difficult, what often saves the relationship is the feeling that the parent can't possibly love the child more than he or she already does. But my first therapist made me believe that I wasn't loved. He

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kept insisting that the relationship with my father was really a power struggle, and I bought into it.

I cannot tell you how much I regret those three years when my parents weren't in my life. Right after we reconciled, I asked my father if he forgave me, and he said, "Of course I forgive you. I forgave you right away." He was a very good person, and the only person who made me think otherwise was that therapist.

What did the second therapist do differently?

She told me her personal story. Her mother had gone through the Holocaust but somehow wasn't embittered by it, even though she'd had a very difficult time. She loved life and was very appreciative of everything she had. By contrast, her mother-in-law was also a Holocaust survivor, but she was extremely bitter.

The therapist was the first *kallah* in the family, and when she got engaged, she bought a cassette player for her husband's younger siblings so they could listen to

music. Her future mother-in-law yelled at her, "How can you listen to music after what I went through?" The therapist pointed out to me that different people react to things differently, and we just have to deal with it rather than cut them out of our lives.

When I told her that I'd had a good relationship with my parents before seeing the first therapist, she said, "You still have that relationship, but you were empowered in the wrong way." It took a while for me to understand this. I had to start by taking baby steps, but *baruch Hashem*, the relationship was restored. My father had many *maalos*, and he was beloved by many people. He also had a great sense of humor.

The Torah says, "*V'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho*," but it doesn't say, "*V'ahavta es avicha v'es imecha*." It says, "*Kabeid es avicha v'es imecha*." Someone once quoted Rav Gamliel Rabinowitz, who said that parents are so afraid of their children these days that there is now an Eleventh Commandment: "*Kabeid es banecha v'es bitecha*."

Honoring your parents can be very hard, but for years I did it even when it wasn't

easy. Then I had those years of turmoil for no reason, and it was all because of *Toras goyim*.

How did your children react to the fact that you weren't speaking to your parents?

They couldn't understand why they couldn't go to Bubby and Zeidy anymore. My youngest son in particular was very upset.

When people cut off contact with their parents, they don't realize that they are simultaneously depriving their children of their grandparents.

Absolutely. It's the exact opposite of what the Torah says.

Every therapist works to bring memories to the surface. A good therapist, like the one I went to later, works to bring good memories to the fore. She explained to me that some Holocaust survivors were able to take their trauma and put it in a box; it was still there, but they were able to open a new box and move on. In bad therapy, the therapist unleashes bad feelings that fester and wreak havoc in your life and in the lives of everyone in your family. It's great to have someone validate your anger and pain, but what often follows are blame, victimization and self-absorption.

In good therapy, the same feelings come up, but they're accompanied by compassion and lead to a greater connection. I wasn't given the tools to do that because my first therapist wasn't interested in having me establish that connection.

By the way, my first therapist saw me privately and charged \$150 an hour. My second therapist works in a clinic. She gets a salary and sees eight patients a day, so she isn't doing it for the money.

What was your father's so-called "crime," aside from disciplining your son?

He didn't really commit a "crime." The

therapist made me feel as if it was my job to help him work on his *middos*.

Before Rav Gissinger passed away, I told him how guilty I still felt, and he told me that it says in the Gemara that whatever you ultimately end up doing is the real truth. "I know you love your father," he told me. "The only thing guilt is good for is doing *teshuvah*, because you have to have *charatab*, and you asked your father for *mechilah*." I know that my father really forgave me. He was a good person who happened to have a few *chesronos*, just like the rest of us.

I've come to realize that a big part of life is trying to get along with people. Some relationships get harder and some get easier as time goes by.

How many years did you have with your father after you made up with him?

I had four good years after the three bad ones. I shudder to think what would have happened if I'd never gotten away from that therapist and had the opportunity to reconcile with my father before he passed away. Someone wrote that the euphoria of empowerment overwhelms your *seichel*, and that's very true.

Is your objective in publicizing this to make others aware that they may be doing certain things because they're under the spell of a therapist?

I believe that there's good therapy and bad therapy, and there's a lot of bad therapy. Rav Gissinger described it as a "*mageifab*." I have a neighbor who told me she has a teenage niece who was having difficulties. Her parents took her for therapy, and the next thing they knew, the therapist had advised the girl to cut herself off from them.

What reason did she have for not speaking to them?

We don't know what the reason is.

I know someone else like that whose parents were told that their married daughter was cutting herself off from them with



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reshus from Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky. The father called Rav Shmuel to ask him about it, and Rav Shmuel said he had no idea what he was talking about. “It’s possible that they sent someone in to ask me about a certain scenario, and I said that if it was exactly as they described, they should do that, but I never spoke to them directly.”

Rav Shmuel then called the daughter and said, “You’re using my name, but I never spoke to you, and I would like to do so now.” But she and her husband never went to talk to him. There are now three grandchildren whom the grandparents have never seen.

My parents forgave me, but I know someone who was also “empowered” and then managed to break free of that mindset, but her parents refuse to forgive her, saying they just can’t go through the ups and downs again because it’s too painful. They’ve already made peace with not having her in their lives. I *daven* that they will change their minds.

I know someone whose daughter had not spoken to her for 20 years. I’m not even sure why. The daughter wanted to have contact with her mother, but the father told the mother that if she had anything to do with their daughter while she was refusing to speak to him, he would leave her. He forced her to choose between him and their daughter.

Twenty years went by, and the daughter had a few children in *shidduchim*. She also had a sick child. She went to Rav Galai for a *brachah* and told him all her problems. “Someone has a *hakpadah* against you,” he said. “Who is it? With whom did you have a fight?” She started to cry and told him that she hadn’t spoken to her parents in 20 years. He said, “You have to make *shalom* with your parents.”

She went to the Kosel and cried her eyes out. Out of the blue this mother got a text from her daughter: “Mommy, I’m at the

Kosel, and I’m begging you for forgiveness. I’m going through such a hard time.” This woman was suddenly introduced to a whole new part of her family, as she had never met her grandchildren.

This woman’s husband is *takeh* a difficult person, but everyone is obligated to deal with their parents to the best of their ability. I’m not saying that there aren’t extreme cases. There are, and I know of a few of them. But this wasn’t one of them.

Have you ever convinced someone to reconnect with his or her parents?

I’m not a professional, but people do call me sometimes. One thing I’ve learned is that if you’re not a professional, you should never validate someone’s complaints. My father used to tell me never to say anything bad about someone’s spouse because once they make up, they’ll always remember what you said. And the same goes for parents and children. If a child says something negative about his parents, you can say, “That must have been hard,” but you shouldn’t egg him on.

I have an aunt who once made a nasty remark about my father’s temper, and I still remember it. She wasn’t wrong, but still... My father did have a temper, but he was a good man. The therapist made me concentrate on that small negative part of him, and that doesn’t make any sense.

When you meet someone in this *matzav*, do you tell her not to make the same mistake that you did?

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CUTTING OFF ONE'S PARENTS ISN'T A CURE. ALL IT DOES IS BRING PAIN TO THE PARENTS, THE CHILD, THE GRANDCHILDREN AND THE EXTENDED FAMILY.

Only if it comes up in the conversation. I have a friend who belongs to a support group for parents whose children have cut them off. She always tells me about the depth of the pain they express and how it feels like a betrayal. She's actually gotten some of these people's children to contact me. It's obviously very personal, so I get very upset. It's a crisis that's getting worse by the day.

I know someone who has an only child, a daughter. Yes, she's a very tough woman, but her daughter didn't talk to her for years. The husband recently passed away, and now they're talking again. I went to be *menachem aveil*, and I saw that they were both trying their best. But there's just story after story.

My father was so forgiving. He even told me how sorry he was about what I had gone through. And my mother was like that as well.

There was another case where the daughter had stopped talking to her mother. Then

they made up and started to slowly bridge the gap, but every time the mother did an "*aveirah*," the daughter went back to her therapist and stopped talking to her again.

What was her "*aveirah*"?

The daughter was very into boundaries. Which parent doesn't sometimes cross a boundary? But this particular mother's "sin" was that she once walked into her daughter's house unannounced—after finding the door wide open and ringing the doorbell. The daughter insisted that she had crossed a boundary and kicked her out of the house. She told her never to come back unless she asked permission first. I would never have done such a thing to my parents before I got caught up in the therapy, and then I found myself in the same hole.

There's another issue here. Sometimes, if the therapist is a former *talmid* or fellow *mispallel* of a *rav*—or the wife of a former *talmid* or *mispallel*—that *rav* might trust

the therapist too much.

People are getting divorced right and left, and there are a lot of difficult marriages. But there's bad, there's very bad, and then there's worse. You're better off with bad than you are with worse, even though bad is difficult. And the same is true when it comes to parents and children.

During our conversation this woman telling me her story kept breaking down in sobs and saying, "You don't understand—I loved my father! I really did. I can't believe that a therapist was able to manipulate me into hurting him. He convinced me that my father didn't love me, but he did, in his own way. And I loved him."

She also kept marveling over what a close call she'd had. "Imagine if I hadn't had the guts to break away from the therapist. I would have lost out on so much, and I would never have had those wonderful last four years."

She has only one message for our readers: Cutting off one's parents isn't a cure. All it does is bring pain to the parents, the child, the grandchildren and the extended family. It is a last resort to be reserved for only the most untenable situations. ●

The protagonist can be reached through Ami Magazine.

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