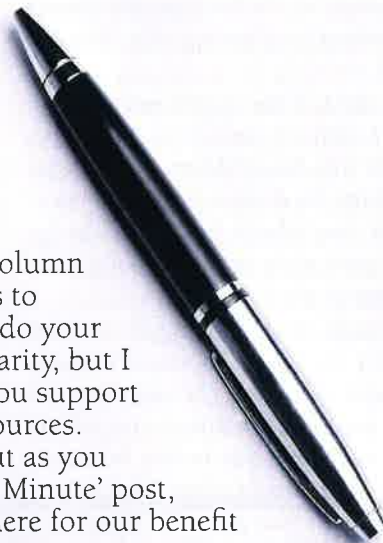


Ask Rabbi Sha

Dear
Rabbi
Shais Taub



I am an avid reader of your column and always enjoy your answers to the questions posed. Not only do your answers provide insight and clarity, but I am always impressed at how you support them thoroughly with Torah sources.

This is not only necessary, but as you say in your recent 'Meaningful Minute' post, the Torah and its *mitzvos* are there for our benefit and show us the best way to live.

Therefore, I was extremely surprised to read your answer to the broken-hearted mother whose daughter had cut off from her for five years but now has been making overtures towards her. (Considering this daughter went so far as to write a "goodbye" letter to her parents, one can't help questioning her motivation for these overtures.)

In your answer, you approached this issue from a purely personal-psychological level and did not include a halachic or hashkafic perspective, which is in stark contrast to your usual style, which has always been to back up your answer with Torah sources.

Allow me to ask you how the mitzvah of *kibud horim* can be reconciled with the daughter's behavior of cutting off from her parents and her subsequent setting the terms of reconciliation to only speak to her mother. I have heard that some mental health practitioners base the permission for withdrawal of the filial duty of *kibud horim* on the opinion of Rav Moshe Feinstein, *zt"l*, who exempts the fulfillment of a mitzvah when this mitzvah endangers mental health (see *Igros Moshe Orach Chayim* 172).

A Third Look at Parental Alienation

However, this *heter* allows for withdrawal from *kibud horim* in a passive way only (similar to *Yoreh Dei'ah* 240:17), not in the active way described by the mother. To write a "good-bye" letter and then dictate the terms of a relationship is actively violating the obligations of *kibud* and especially of *mora*. If her mother consents to this behavior, she might have a problem with *lifnei iver!*

Furthermore, the *halachah* states (*Yoreh Dei'ah* 240:17) that a wife's first obligation is to her husband, and in some cases this might even mean putting her husband before her parents. That being the case, surely this applies even more so when this involves an adult child to whom *al pi Torah* a parent has no obligation.

Also, from a practical perspective it seems strange that a woman should take steps that might jeopardize her marriage for the sake of an adult child. It's bad enough that the mother is broken-hearted from her errant daughter's behavior; why should she also lose her husband's support?

Naturally, it is possible that this case might be different, as the daughter could be under the influence of an abusive husband and therefore possibly an *anusah*, but I am still surprised that the halachic angle was not explored. At a time when more and more children feel at liberty to cut their parents out of their lives, causing grief and turmoil to the parents and the wider



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family, your response might have provided justification to their behavior rather than stressing that their actions violate *mitzvos* that have always been considered as fundamentals of *Yiddishkeit*.

Sincerely,

Shmuel Karchi

Dear Ami: I am writing as a daughter who has been estranged from her mother for some time. I thought it would be helpful to offer my point of view in order for people to understand how such a tragic situation comes about. The nature of a mother is to love and care for a child unconditionally. I have never experienced this.

My mother is an extremely difficult and verbally abusive person. As children, we all lived in the shadow of her volatile and unstable personality. To outsiders, she appears mostly elegant, personable and charming; she reserves her mean behavior to those very close to her. As we started to leave the house and establish our own families, she felt her control over us weakening and did her best to put down our spouses and in-laws in front of us, thereby ensuring we remain loyal only to her. This started deepening the cracks in a weak relationship. She also created many rifts between us as siblings, and would rejoice when we didn't get along, because this meant we would be more loyal to her.

To describe life with a narcissistic mother to someone who has not experienced it is simply impossible. A mother who is narcissistic is the opposite of everything a mother should be, yet she expects her children to

be there constantly for her and to give in to her unreasonable demands. If she finds her children not fulfilling her unrelatable expectations, she laments about them being disloyal and terrible children.

Every *simchah* I made, starting from the *bris milah* of my oldest son, to the wedding of my youngest daughter, was overshadowed by trauma and tears, as she made ridiculous demands ensuring that she was always the center of attention. As my children grew older, and I started to distance myself from her unhealthy ways and to establish boundaries to protect my sanity, my marriage and the calmness of my home, she would become increasingly more volatile, going so far as to try to ruin my own children's *shidduchim*. I even heard her once say, when she was angry with one of my siblings, "I *daven* he should become sick with cancer."

I was once in the hospital recovering from a serious operation when she suddenly appeared in my room, pulled off my oxygen mask, and whispered loudly, "Maybe this will teach you to do *teshuvah*." If this seems extreme to you, let me explain

There are situations where both the parents and the child are wrong, and even situations where neither are wrong.

that this is the bitter reality of children living with a narcissistic parent.

The only healthy way to maintain the relationship is with minimal contact, to ensure that your life and your relationship with your own spouse, children and grandchildren can flourish, and that you are not a prisoner of her excessively self-serving behavior.

When I encourage my adult children to try to maintain somewhat of a relationship with her, they often break down in tears, recalling the multitude of times they saw her taunt me, make me cry, and embarrass me in front of others. This was besides the times she would taunt them or make inappropriate comments to them. It remains a source of tremendous pain that I and my children don't have a grandmother to share their *simchos* because of the potential to be caused immeasurable hurt and destruction of their relationships with their spouses and children.

We are respectful to her, call to wish a good Yom Tov, and cautiously invite her to *simchos* (and hope she won't come and ruin them). But there cannot and will not ever be a warm contact and loving relationship. She is simply not capable. And as much as the tears prick our eyelids when we see a mother and daughter share a genuine moment of love, when we see an *Elter Bubby* cradling her great-grandchild, we choke them back and know this is something we will never experience with her.

I *daven* that all your readers should only know of happy and healthy relationships that bring *nachas* to themselves and Hashem.

A Suffering Child

Ask Rabbi Shais Taub

Dear Ami: I would like to respectfully disagree with one of the responses to Rabbi Shais Taub in the Second Look installment regarding the Broken-Hearted Mother whose estranged daughter wants to reconcile with her but not her husband.

The letter writer's first point is that a wife's loyalty must be to her spouse and to her marriage. That's very true, but what exactly does that have to do with a mother responding to her estranged daughter's attempts at reconciliation? What's so disloyal about that? Rabbi Taub assures the mother that she does not need "to feel guilty about taking care of her child...[as] being connected to family is a basic human need. [For example,] if a child doesn't eat, should we punish her by refusing to feed her when she asks for food?"

The letter writer disagrees with this premise and argues that "She (the child) does not deserve to have her hunger satisfied by her mother at the cost of her father's pain. As difficult as it may be, she should find solace in the knowledge that she is doing the right thing by not going along with it. As a true *eishes chayil*, she should give her husband love and protect him from any more pain."

But why would a husband be "pained" by his wife giving food to their starving child? In my humble opinion, if a husband is genuinely pained by this, he has a serious problem. In such a case, if she is a true *eishes chayil*, she should try to get help for her husband. Furthermore, would this not be a compelling reason for a child to want to cut off contact with her parents?

He draws other conclusions about assertions that Rabbi Taub never made. Rabbi Taub was very clear that we don't know why the daughter is estranged. There are several possibilities here, and it is presumptuous and short-sighted to assume that the child is absolutely at fault without having concrete evidence to support this.

To quote Rabbi Taub: "There are some

Tears prick our eyelids when we see a mother and daughter share a genuine moment of love, when we see an Elter Bubby cradling her great-grandchild.

cases of parental alienation where the parents are absolutely at fault, yet there are those where the child is...[but it's] impossible to determine from one letter written by only one side which kind of case is being presented. In this specific case there was a way of offering a way forward without having to assume which party, if any, was in the wrong. After all, I have to assume that what the parents really want is reconciliation. As such, I suggested a way through which they could begin achieving that."

Finally, the letter writer's claim that the daughter is being *oveir on issurim d'Oraisa* is unsubstantiated. In fact, it is entirely plausible that under these circumstances, if the mother takes his advice and makes her reconciliation with her daughter contingent on the father's inclusion, she—the mother—is actually being *oveir on the issur of lifnei iver* by putting a stumbling block in front of her daughter's attempts to repair the relationship (and thereby thwarting the chance for her daughter to be *mekayeim* the mitzvah of *kibbud eim*)!

Thank you for allowing me to present my views on this very important and thought-provoking issue.

Nina Frost

Dear Readers

It is obvious, and I suppose not very surprising, that parental alienation is a topic about which many people feel strongly. Since we have continued to receive a deluge of responses (some of which are printed above), I want to share the following few thoughts.

First, I wish to reiterate what I wrote two weeks ago in the first follow-up to this topic, and that is: Each story of parental alienation is different—the nature of each case varying from one extreme to the other. My intention in answering the original letter was therefore not to take a stance on this highly complex and nuanced issue, but to attempt to offer a reasonable path forward for this particular letter writer and her family in their particular situation. Once again, I want to make clear that no inferences about other cases or the subject in general should be drawn from this very specific response.

Next, to those who seem to automatically take exception with the fact that I did not take the side of the parents, I want to ask one question. If you are the one going through the pain of being alienated from your child, perhaps you did nothing at all to cause such treatment, but that doesn't mean that there is never a case in which a child is justified in severely minimizing or breaking off contact from a parent. The letter above from *Suffering Child* is one such example. Does her case strike you as one in which the child is being stubborn, insolent or unreasonable?

My point is, as I said previously, there are situations where the parents are in the wrong, situations where the child is in the wrong, situations where both are in the wrong, and even situations where neither is in the wrong. It therefore makes no sense to try to take a side (any side) without knowing which kind of case one is actually dealing with. What does make

sense is to look for a possibility for healing. And if there is one, then assigning blame has to be made far, far less important than taking a step, even one tiny step, toward reconciliation.

As to the charge that my response two weeks ago was lacking Torah sources, that is a legitimate critique. To be frank, my thinking was that the basic Torah value of seeking peace is obvious and known to all, requiring no source. However, if I were to have given sources, I might have included:

“Be of the disciples of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace...” (Avos 1:12).

“The entire Torah is for the sake of the ways of peace” (Gittin 59b).

“Great is peace, as the whole Torah was given in order to promote peace in the world, as it is stated (Mishlei 3:17), ‘Her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace’” (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Chanukah* 4:14.)

Furthermore, we are all aware of the well-known dictum of the Sages: “A person should always be flexible like a reed, and not hard like a cedar” (*Taanis* 20a)

Now, if one were to argue that the parent-child relationship is different, my response would be that although each situation must be considered on its own, there is no rule stopping parents from forgoing their honor in the course of seeking peace with a child, as *halachah* states: “*Av shemachal al kevodo, kevodo machul*—A father may absolve a child of his duty to honor him” (*Kiddushin* 32a, *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Dei'ah* 240:19. See also *Sefer Chasidim, siman* 565.)

Indeed, it is interesting to me that one of the letters above suggested that if the mother in the original case were to forgive her daughter, she would be the one transgressing *lifnei iver*. I don't know if that is true; however, I do think that the very opposite argument could be made. (I did not make this argument in my original response, and I am still not making it, because I don't know the situation. However, I think it is at least worthy to consider for the sake of perspective.) According to the sources just mentioned, a parent who is overly demanding of his or her children (thus causing the children to not be able to adhere to all that is demanded of them)

would be transgressing *lifnei iver*. Of course, what constitutes “overly demanding” is a discussion in its own right. The point remains, however, that such a concept exists *al pi Torah* and should at least be included in the present discussion.

At any rate, as I said earlier, I don't think it's helpful to figure out who is wrong or who did which sin. The main thing is peace and reconciliation above all.

If I can have the final word on this subject (for now), this is what I would like it to be: If you are a parent who is estranged from your child, or a child who is estranged from your parent, please take this moment to consider reconciliation and do your utmost, as difficult as it may be, for the sake of peace. Ask yourself if there is some small step toward peace that may be taken. For instance, in the case we have discussed, allowing the child to begin reconciling with one parent before the other; or in the case of *Suffering Child* above, where she has minimized contact, but still maintains it. And, of course, there are some very rare cases where until Moshiach comes no amount of reconciliation is possible at all. But even in such cases, the possibility for peace should be considered again and again.

In short, whether you are the child or the parent, I ask you to think about what you can do right now to pursue peace and take that step, even if it is very small. And in the words of the blessing with which Jewish parents bless their children: “May Hashem lift up His countenance to you and give you peace” (*Bamidbar* 6:25).

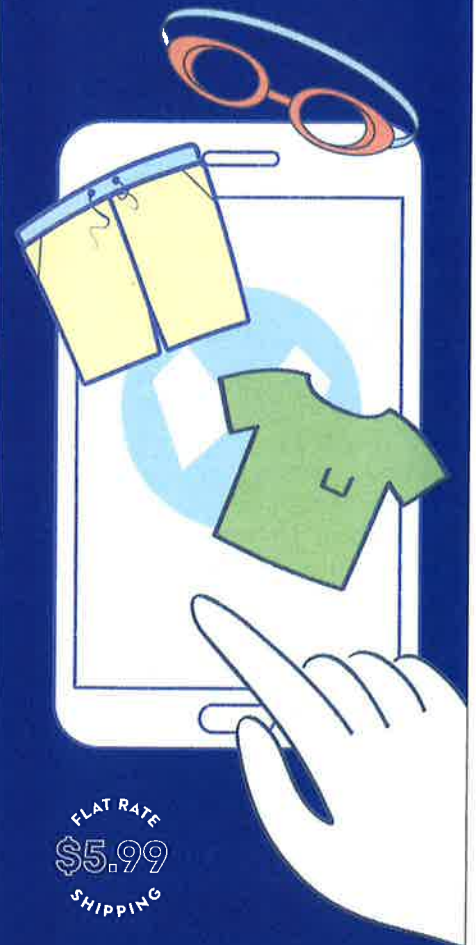
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