

Navigating *Life*

This Week:
PARENTING

with Slovic
Jungreis-Wolff

Torn between her child and her mother

Dear Slovic:

Last month, my dear father passed away after a long illness. My mother is 75 years old, but she is not in the best of health. She is diabetic and also has a heart condition, and my father's passing has put her in a very depressed state. I imagine our dilemma is not unique, but for us it has been causing a lot of anguish and a rift in my family.

It was decided among my siblings, and I agree with the decision, that we cannot let my mother sleep alone, and each of us will do her share and take responsibility for one night of the week. Some of my sisters don't have young children at home, so they are sleeping with my mother, while other siblings are sending their teenage daughters.

My daughter, who is 14, is refusing to go. She says that she will not sleep in the same room where my father passed away (my mother lives in a one-bedroom apartment). She also is the child who very rarely went to see my father, because she found it difficult to see him in a compromised way. She is the kind of child who hates changes; she hates sleeping anywhere other than her own bed. I cannot sleep with my mother because I am nursing an infant.

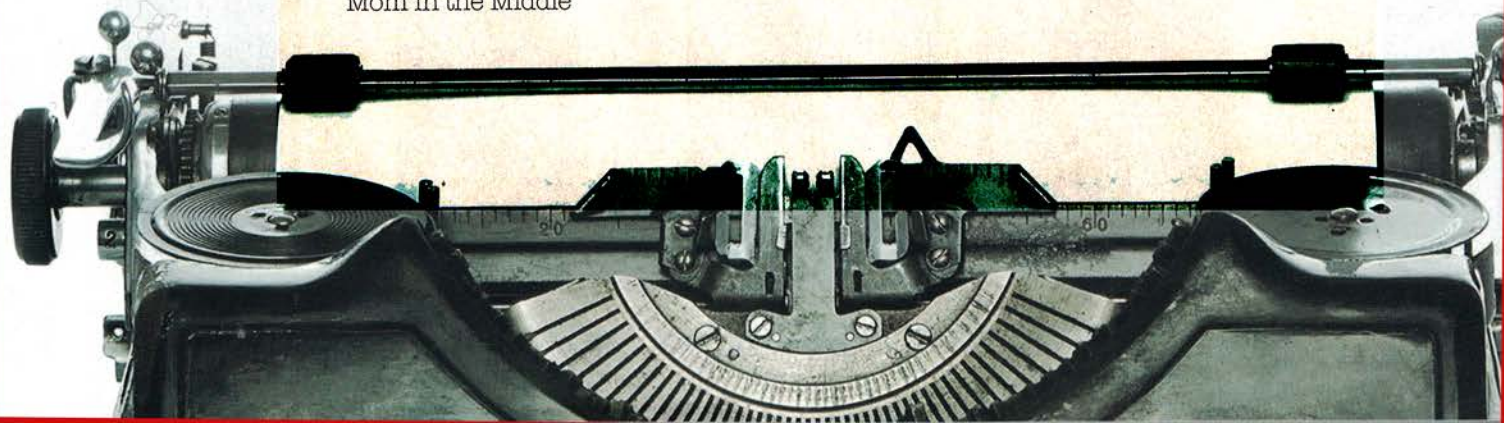
My siblings are furious that my husband and I are "letting our daughter get away with it, that we are letting her be selfish, and a child must learn to do chesed" and so on and so forth, and "it's all on their backs now." But my husband and I feel that regardless of whether we think she is right or wrong, we cannot force a 14-year-old to do something she doesn't want to do. We don't want this to become a "war" between her and us.

My questions are as follows: Do you believe we should force our daughter? What should we tell my siblings? And most importantly, what should we tell our daughter? Should we try to continue to persuade her? And if yes, would you have tips on how to persuade her? And how should we react to her not going? Should we show her that we disapprove of her behavior?

Mom in the Middle

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The goal is chinuch (education), which refers to the breaking in of a person into the role or task each is destined to perform.

I would like to first express words of *nechamah* for your loss. No matter our age, losing a dear parent is most difficult. Coupled with the illness of your mother, dealing with siblings who are “furious,” and trying to figure out how to balance your child’s needs along with your family—you obviously are handling many emotions right now. There is pain, too, from the anguish and rift in the family. The greatest *nechamah* would be *shalom*.

There is of course no easy answer to your predicament. Perhaps your resolution will not satisfy all involved. But the main thing is that, when looking back at this time of your life, you feel sure that you did the right thing. Regret eats away at the peace of too many people.

You ask a few questions: Should you force your daughter? What do you tell your siblings? And, as you write, “Most importantly, what should we tell our daughter?”

I believe that you are correct that communicating well with your daughter is the most important issue here. The rest will follow and fall into place once you have gained clarity.

Let us begin by understanding our goal here. The goal is *chinuch* (education), and Rashi explains that this refers to the breaking in of a person into the role or task each is destined to perform (*Bereishis* 14:14). You would like your daughter to step up, to do a *chesed*, to be *mechabeid* her grandmother and not allow Bubby to sleep alone.

The question is how would you teach these *middos* to your daughter? How can you help her step into a role that she is reluctant, even afraid, to carry?

What are your choices? You ask if you should force her or show disapproval. Force,



threats and harshness will never yield long-term growth. You may think that you have achieved results, but the child is left with resentment and anger that simmer inside. The short-term results cannot contain the damage done. The key is effective communication.

You describe your child’s nature. “She hates change. She hates sleeping anywhere but her own bed.” She found it difficult to visit with your father in his compromised position and is also fearful of sleeping in the room where her Zeidy died. Your mother is unfortunately not well, battling diabetes, a heart condition and now she is severely depressed.

“*Chanoch lanaar al pi darko*”—Educate a child according to his own way, his inborn nature. If we force a child on a path that is inappropriate for his nature, there will be difficult consequences. This does not mean that we cannot expect greatness from our

children. But we must figure out how to work with this child’s particular nature. Your daughter is sensitive, loves routine, and is expressing a fear of sleeping in a bed that she associates with loss. She is expressing a need for security and safety. She may be afraid of the responsibility of caring for an elderly grandmother who is ill. What happens if there’s an emergency while she is there? She may also be afraid of her Bubby’s depressed state. For some children, none of this would matter. But for your daughter’s nature, it is difficult.

The question is how do we help your child grow, move out of her comfort zone, extend herself, and experience incredible spiritual and emotional strength?

I suggest 3 steps:

First, make space for your child to be heard. She needs to see that you want to listen to her concerns and understand her needs. Allow your daughter to voice her worries and unease. Tell her that you will address her discomfort in a practical way. It’s important that you deal with your daughter’s fears. When we are scared we have an “avoidance reaction,” where we walk away from our fears instead of confronting them. This will not be the only time in life that your daughter will be afraid. Children express fears like sleeping alone in their rooms, sleepaway camp, taking exams, trying new experiences; we don’t just say “forget it.” We help them overcome. It’s okay to sometimes be uncomfortable, to stretch in life. This is how we build emotional muscle and resilience. You are helping your child gain “grit,” which is a key for success.



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This may take some
time. You are trying
your best to come
up with a solution
that works for
everyone's needs.

Next, I would ask that you help your daughter open her heart to her Bubby. It is most difficult to require help as one grows older. As a sensitive child, I believe that it is important for your daughter to put herself in her Bubby's shoes. What does it feel like for Bubby to sleep alone, to be lonely, to miss Zeidy, and to not feel well? A better understanding elicits empathy and a desire to do *chesed*. This is not the same as making a child feel guilty by saying things like "I can't believe you!" "Why can't you just do this? Why are you being so difficult?" The problem is not selfishness; it is fear.

At this point I'd like to add an additional thought. You write that your daughter very rarely went to see your father, because she found it difficult to see him in a compromised way. I do not want to, *chas v'shalom*, cause you any pain. But for the sake of those reading this response, I would encourage parents to both role model and help children gain the ability to see grandparents through the many seasons of life. When I was a child, my mother would always take us to visit my Zayda and receive his *brachah* even when my Zayda was very ill. He could not speak and was unable to move. I overcame any fear because I saw the way my mother related to her beloved Tatte. I will forever remember my Zayda's hands being placed upon my head for a *brachah*. I was taught and came to learn that this was my greatest *zechus*. How I wish I would have the opportunity today for just one more such moment in my life.

Finally, you work on options together. Perhaps your daughter can sleep over with a cousin (perhaps in the living room) and

not go alone at first. Maybe she can bring a friend so that she has company. Perhaps an option is that you join her for the first few times along with your infant. Not comfortable, but maybe the bridge needed for her to go it alone. Another idea is that your mother comes to spend Shabbos with you, and that becomes your family's night. Your daughter should be given opportunities to honor her Bubby, serving food and drinks, helping Bubby be comfortable and getting to know Bubby better, so that you can segue to the desired long-term solution. We want to give your daughter the confidence needed to overcome her fears. This will help her beyond this situation; it will be life changing.

Be truthful with your siblings. You are here for them even if it's not exactly the way they may believe you should be. This may take some time. You are trying your best to come up with a solution that works for everyone's needs.

As you kindle your Shabbos *licht*, add a *tefilah* to allow your words to enter the hearts of those you love.

May you see *nachas* from your children and give *nachas* to your dear mother.

Slovie Jungreis-
Wolff

Please send your parenting questions to
Editorial@Amimagazine.org, subject line:
Parenting.