

Ask Rabbi Shais Taub

Dear
Rabbi
Shais Taub

A few months ago you addressed the topic of parental alienation for a few weeks in a row. I didn't write in until now, but here's my story and a fresh take on this highly-debated topic.

There is a lot of awareness about parents who are alienated from their children and how heartbreaking it is for them. These parents find each other via support groups to keep themselves strong. But I want to speak about a different trend that's hidden very well—parents cutting off from their children and hiding under the umbrella of “my child broke off” or “my child-in-law doesn't let my son/daughter have a relationship with us.” We're not the only ones going through this, and we personally know many others with the same script.

I'm one of those children who has not had any relationship with my parents for the past 15 years (to the point that they haven't met any of my children). Shortly after my husband and I got married, my parents started speaking negatively about my husband simply because they disliked him personally, and they tried to convince me to feel the same. They got me caught up in the negativity, and I was trapped between them and my husband.

After discussing it with *rabbanim* and therapists, we came to realize that my parents' actions were not okay, and we were guided on how to set healthy boundaries to avoid the negativity. We went out of our comfort zone to do this in the most respectful way, being fully guided by *daas Torah* at

My Parents Don't Talk to Me

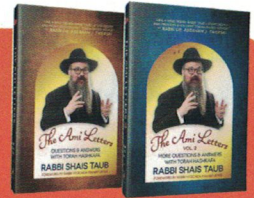
every step of the way. As a result, things came to a head, and we were excommunicated from the family. My parents made it clear that as long as I am living with my husband I am no longer part of their family. This was all due to the healthy relationship we were pursuing.

My parents joined the support groups of parents who sadly had children who cut off from them, and they tell the same “story” to anyone willing to listen. Unfortunately, the pleas of such parents have been heard and accepted as fact, with no one thinking otherwise.

I would like to see you weigh in on this topic and perhaps give the “alienated children” out there some support and *chizzuk* for the suffering we are enduring.

Alienated Daughter

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Dear Alienated Daughter:

Thank you for sharing your story, which I think helps underscore the complexity of this very painful topic. The story of what led to alienation is rarely as simple as it seems. I think this is important for people to realize.

Before I go any further, I want to clarify that you did not write to me for advice; rather, it was so that I could "weigh in" on the topic in light of what you shared. The comments that follow are therefore of a general nature. I hope that you and others will find the articulation of these ideas helpful in your own understanding of this issue.

As you mention in your letter, the subject of parental alienation was discussed some months ago in this column, and, as I am sure you remember, the discussion elicited some intense responses that were dissatisfied with my approach. But I will repeat now something

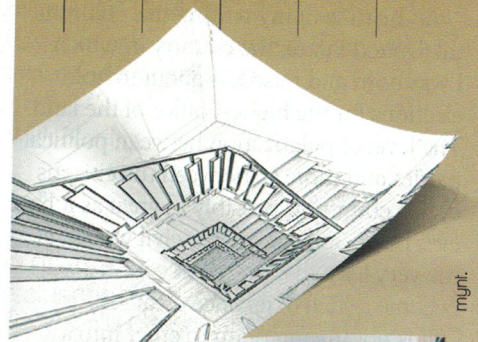
There are two sides to every story, and they might not even be aware of how the other side understands what happened.

I wrote then. The backstory in such cases is rarely as straightforward as people think it is. To the contrary, there are two sides to every story, and not only do the parties not agree with each other's versions of the story, they might not even be aware of how the other side understands what happened. Your story is a case in point.

What emerges from this is that the goal in such situations should not be to figure out who is right and who is wrong, which may never happen, but to accept that the story is complicated and try to move both parties in the direction of reconciliation. Full reconciliation may not always be possible, but at least when people start to move away from their entrenched positions, there can be an easing of tension and healing can begin. The only way this can happen, however, is by realizing that establishing the facts of what really happened is not as important as figuring out a way forward. Indeed, the opposite is often true. Only after there is peace can people look back and understand what really happened.

Interestingly, there was another subject that received pushback from readers recently—that of husbands and wives making sacrifices for peace rather than trying to get their own way. I think the criticism of my approach to that subject stems from the same misunderstanding of what I said about parental alienation. People want there to be "sides," and they want the rabbi to take a side. But this is not the path to peace. Trying to establish whose version of the facts is correct only deepens conflict.

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Ask Rabbi Shais Taub

At the time of my writing this column, the United States, the country in which I was born and raised, is about to hold elections for the highest office of the land. The level of polarization between political parties and more so between the citizens of this country is possibly as great as it has ever been. Some even fear civil war, or at the very least that this great country will become a shell of its once great self.

It is not my intention to enter into a political discussion. I am saying this all only as a way of understanding how the same thing that is happening in our country right now may be happening in our personal lives. This country will be great again when all Americans want what is best for their common destiny, not what they think is best for people like them. Families heal when all members of the family want what is best for family unity, not to be vindicated or have their narrative validated.

If you are right now in a conflict with a parent, a child, a spouse, or another loved one, *chas v'shalom*, is the way forward to become increasingly entrenched in your position? Is it to pursue victory at any cost? Is the goal to push until there is actually civil war? Again, I am not speaking about politics. That is the *mashal*. I am speaking about the Jewish family. Every side believes they are right. Every side has its version of what really happened. But where do we want to go from there? That is the question.

If people want to stick to their side of the story and get other people to co-sign their version of the truth, it's not hard to find others who will gladly take a side. There are plenty of people who like taking sides. But if you want peace, if you want to maintain as close a relationship with your parent, child, spouse, sibling, or loved one as possible, the only way forward is to stop looking for people who will take your side and look for people who will support your desire for peace.

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Since this is such a serious subject, I hope it's not inappropriate to share a joke, but I think it has a lesson that is quite appropriate. Two friends run into each other on the street. "What's new?" asks one to the other. "I divorced my wife," says the other, "We just couldn't make it work." Some time later they meet again. "What's new?" "I got married again." "To whom?" "My first wife." "I thought you said you couldn't make it work?" "For a second marriage, she's good enough."

The point is that when people are humble and flexible then even a conflict that seemed irresolvable can be eased. The only question is what will it take for people to come to this point—and remain at this point. Certainly one important aspect is to seek out support from people who are more interested in peace than with supporting one version of the narrative or the other.

I want to leave you with this thought from the *parshah* that we will be reading this Shabbos. In the beginning of *Parshas Lech Lecha* we read how Avraham had a relative (he was both his nephew and his brother-in-law), Lot, who came with him to Canaan from their homeland. After a while, it became clear that Avraham and Lot had different values. When their shepherds started fighting, it got to the point where Avraham finally said to his relative: "Please let there be no quarrel between me and you...for we are

brothers... Please separate from me. If you go left, I will go right. If you go right, I will go left."

This clearly sounds like a parting of ways, which is why the way Rashi explains the simple meaning of these words is puzzling:

"If you go left, I will go right: Wherever you dwell, I will not distance myself from you. I'll stand by you as a protector and help. And ultimately Lot required this, as it says: 'And Avram heard that his relative was captured...' [and went to rescue him.]"

Rashi's explanation sounds like the very opposite of what the *pasuk* says. Are they separating or staying together? How can Rashi say that "You go left; I'll go right" really means, in so many words, "I won't be far off," or "I've got your back." It sounds like Rashi is turning the plain meaning of the verse on its head.

But Rashi can also be understood as hinting at the secret of how to deal with someone who I realize is on the opposite side of an issue as I am. Do I fight them? Do I cut them out of my life? Or is there another option? Can I say, "You and I are on two opposite sides. If you go left, then I'm going right... and yet, at the very same time, I'm with you. I'm there for you?"

It's easy to say, "We are on *opposite* sides, so let's stay away from each other," and it's easy to say, "We are on the *same* side, so I am with you."

But how do you say, "I am on the opposite side... and I am with you"?

The answer is that this story is in the *parshah* of *Lech Lecha*, which means "get out of yourself" or "go beyond yourself." "*Lech Lecha*" is self-transcendence, literally rising above ego. And that's how we know that Avraham cannot possibly be abandoning Lot when he tells him, "If you go left, I will go right. If you go right, I will go left." Because this conversation comes after Avraham has already done his "*Lech*

Cheshbon Hanefesh

Lecha.” He’s transcended himself. And that’s why Rashi explains that “If you go left, I will go right” doesn’t mean saying goodbye but the very opposite. It means, “Wherever you dwell, I will not distance myself from you. I’ll stand by you as a protector and help.”

In other words, we may disagree on the facts—even vehemently—but we’re not resolving this now. We have different versions of reality, different narratives. But we have to set that aside and agree that we both really want the same thing. We want peace. So not only will I not write you off, I must be ready to reach out and help. You’re my brother, just as Lot is still described as the “brother” of Avraham, both when they “separate” into left and

right as well as when Avraham later comes to rescue him.

I understand that one may argue that even if one were to pursue peace the other side is still not ready to do so. That may be true. Indeed, your situation is a case in point, where your parents gave you an impossible ultimatum and you do not see an opening (as of now) for how to reconcile with them.

Nevertheless, it is up to each individual to be able to make a true *cheshbon hanefesh* and say with a completely clear conscience that if there has yet to be a reconciliation, at least I know that the impediment is not coming from me.

And “as waters reflect one’s face, so too does the heart of one man reflect the heart

of another” (*Mishlei* 27:19). Perhaps some day, sooner than we believe, there will be peace and reconciliation.

With Blessing,

RST

● Rabbi Shais Taub is scholar-in-residence at Chabad of the Five Towns. His classes and lectures can be viewed on SoulWords.org. To receive short videos from Rabbi Taub via WhatsApp, subscribe at 516-495-3021. For speaking engagements contact info@SoulWords.org. To have your question answered in this column, email ask@amimagazine.org.

					
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