

* BETWEEN FRIENDS *

with Esther Etiquette

SHVIGGER STORIES

CHANA KORNFELD

Dear Esther,

It has taken me a while to regulate myself to a point where I can calmly write this letter. Thank G-d, I can get through typing it now without breaking down into tears.

This past summer my parents-in-law invited us to spend a month with them in their bungalow in the mountains. My kids were very excited to spend time with their grandparents and with their cousins who spend the summer in the same colony. I was looking forward to the trip as well, knowing what a generous offer this was from my parents-in-law, who are older grandparents.

Well, it was a hard month, to say the least. My in-laws could not handle the noise, the mess, or the extra people in their relatively small space. My mother-in-law is an early riser who enjoys her quiet time and rituals in the morning that include a few cups of coffee, perusing the news, and watering her porch plants. She did not appreciate having the company of a child or two to help her with the hose and would snap at my children almost every morning with:

“Where’s your mother?” and “Who’s watching you?”

Baruch Hashem, we have four young children and I am not always standing right next to them. I let them go into the kitchen without me while I nurse the baby or take a shower and I think it’s ridiculous that my *shvigger* couldn’t give a gracious good morning to her grandkids who wanted to help her and at most asked her to pour them a bowl of cereal.

From the morning, it would only get worse.

Once my family was all ready and in the kitchen, my mother-in-law would disappear for the rest of the day. If she would venture out of her room and find me baking in the kitchen, she would make some remark like, “Wow, your kids really just eat and eat, don’t they?” and march right back to her room or out of the house, clearly annoyed.

Erev Shabbos was a nightmare. My mother-in-law would complain to my husband that I cook too much and too late and that no one needs all that excess food.

Esther, you get the picture, right?

My mother-in-law did not make our stay pleasant and did not appreciate that I did all the cooking for the entire household for four weeks. All she did was complain that I was doing laundry at the wrong times, making too much food, and not watching my children the way I should. We still had a fun time because, of course, that wasn’t the only thing happening. There were pleasant times as well, but I felt uncomfortable a lot.

Now my husband has decided he wants our family to go to his parents for Pesach. He called my mother-in-law and asked her if we could come and her response was:

“We’d love for you to come but we have to discuss some rules for while you’re here.”

I told my husband I will not go if his mother feels the need to give us a list of rules during our stay. If she can’t handle having a family with children in the house, we don’t need to go.

My husband says I am being overly sensitive and depriving my children of special time with his parents who are only getting older (he is the youngest of a very large family).

Esther, what do you think?

Signed,

The Baby’s Wife Who’s Causing Strife

I told my husband I will not go if his mother feels the need to give us a list of rules during our stay. If she can't handle having a family with children in the house, we don't need to go.

Dear Wife,

I think you are being wise by asking for advice in this area and not emphatically telling your husband, “No way, no how, am I spending another blessed moment in the home of your mother!”

Which is what some women would do.

And perhaps part of the reason why you are asking me for my take is because you know that your mother-in-law is not a bad woman, she's just older and the older people get the less they can tolerate mess, noise, and chaos. And the youngsters should be aware and respectful of the aging process. (As an oldest, I do sympathize with youngest children whose experience with their parents as grandparents is very different than the older siblings'—but as we know there are advantages to every age and stage and place in the birth order.)

Also, Hashem commands children (and children-in-law are included in this obligation) to honor their parents. The Torah does not command parents to honor their children. Thus you owe her more consideration and respect than she owes you. Furthermore, you asked the question; she didn't; so let's focus on what you might do differently.

Instead of feeling slighted by your mother-in-law's condition of rules, look at the rules as a gift, a way to avoid the resentment and unpleasantness that happened in the summer. I bet if your mother-in-law had been clear about what she expects and prefers to

happen in her house, everyone would have been happier. This Pesach is your chance for everyone to be happier!

For example, I bet one of your mother-in-law's rules will be that all Erev Shabbos and Erev Yom Tov cooking must be done by 11 a.m. Many people (not only elderly in-laws) do not want their kitchen being messed up again and again and again on a Friday, no matter how delicious the dish that is being cooked up is. And the same is true for baking on a Wednesday. Some people like to walk out of their room into a sparkling clean kitchen and even the aroma of freshly baked cookies will not conquer the annoyance of batter spills and flour dusting and dirty mixing bowls in the sink.

You and your *shvigger* sound very different and I think it would be wise to put yourself in her shoes before you visit her in her home. Think about what *her* preferences are, not yours. If her morning routines are sacred and she doesn't want to be serving breakfast to your adorable children while you shower, respect that. When you are in her house, make sure either you or your husband wakes up with your children, available to tend to their needs. Your *shvigger* clearly does not want to be a third parent (few mothers-in-law do). Many grandparents enjoy watching their grandchildren and interacting with them leisurely, not dutifully. (Babysitting—no. Playing a game after dinner and bath—yes.)

My advice is to be open to listening

to your *shvigger's* rules and abiding by them (assuming they are reasonable) and inferring from those rules how you can conduct yourself during your stay there to have an enjoyable time for all parties involved.

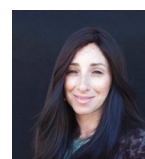
Your husband is right. You will not be able to spend Pesach with his parents forever and it would be a shame to miss a memorable Pesach over these misunderstandings.

Wishing you *shalom bayis* in all the *bayises* you find yourself in! And remember... you'll be a *shvigger* too, one day.

Note to the husband of The Baby's Wife Who's Causing Strife: Be understanding and appreciative of your wife as she tries to deal respectfully with your mother. A listening ear and validation are often all a woman needs to get along well with her *shvigger*.

Signed,

Esther



CHANA KORNFELD, the creator and writer of *Esther Etiquette* (arguably our most popular column since its inception in 2011), lives in Ft.

Lauderdale, Florida, but was raised in Atlanta, Georgia, below the Mason-Dixon line, where good manners are taken as seriously as fried food. Chana was raised by parents and grandparents who taught her that *derech erez kadmah laTorah: First, be a mentsch.*