BETWEEN
FRIENDS
with ESTHER

EtiQuette



Dear Esther

I recently paid a visit to my daughter and son-in-law for an extended weekend and watched her slave all Friday; juggling the babies and the children and the carpools and making a gourmet Shabbos for a huge crowd. After the Friday night meal my daughter walked into the dining room and her husband gave her an expectant look to which she replied, "Oh! I'm sorry I forgot your tea, let me get it now," and she went back to get him his cup of tea. Esther, I might be crazy, you tell me, but it seemed to me that she had such a hard day, it was almost midnight Friday night, she had just finished preparing, serving and cleaning up from a huge meal (putting cranky kids to sleep between courses).

Wouldn't it have been the right thing for him to bring her a cup of tea? She hardly sat down all day! Isn't a man supposed to honor his wife? I couldn't help myself, Esther, I went over to him and said, half joking (but you know I was dead serious), "Berel, my son-in-law, the service isn't fast enough for you around here?"

Did I do wrong? Did Berel do wrong? By the way, it's not just this one incident. I travel to my children all over the world and I always see the things their spouses do to them that are wrong and I have a hard time keeping my mouth shut. Shouldn't I speak up in defense of my children? I certainly did when they were small and it is hard to stop now.

Signed,
Not a Shvyging Shviger

Dear Shviger,

I feel you, Momma Bear. It is hard to sit quietly and watch your beloved child be mistreated, or at least insufficiently appreciated (in your eyes) by the very one who should be protecting and loving her. And though it is hard, as a mother-in-law, it is what you must do. Why? Because any advice, admonishment, suggestion or the like coming from an infuriated and hurt mother-in-law and delivered to her son-in-law will likely be taken the wrong way and is likely to backfire, causing more damage to your daughter than good.

I'm picturing the scene. Say your observations are spot on and Berel does demand way too much from your daughter, works her like a dog and never contributes. You put him in his place and imply, "Berel, you are mistreating your wife! She looks like a slave. Cooking, cleaning, serving you and responding to your every whim all while taking care of seven little children. How could you not help out a bit more and perhaps even pamper her a bit?"

Perhaps Berel is a unique man who can graciously take criticism and not just any criticism, but criticism from his mother-in-law, and use it to become introspective and implement change. But I'm doubting he's that unique man. I'm going to assume he's your regular guy (maybe a bit more self-centered

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than most from the above description) and the second you lay on the criticism his ears start ringing, his heart starts beating faster and his first thought is, *What did my wife say to her mother about me?*

He will pretty much tune out everything you say as he imagines his wife betraying him to her mother. Later he will storm into the bedroom and accuse your daughter of portraying him in a bad light to you and complaining about him. Your poor daughter of course will have no idea what he's talking about and will try to defend herself but he'll already be off saying things like, "This is why I hate having your mother around. She's constantly judging me and meddling in our life. She's hyper-critical and thinks she knows everything!"

This is just the beginning of a long night....

So what did you accomplish? A fight between a husband and wife, a more stressed-out daughter and a son-in-law who now wants you out of the house. Better stay quiet.

I have learned that most couples find their own rhythm that works for them and often what we see is not the whole story. A chauvinistic husband might not make himself that cup of tea or change a diaper (either because he doesn't want to or because his wife enjoys being that kind of wife or because of some unspoken agreement they have between them), but perhaps he is very chivalrous in other ways like making her feel comfortable in crowds and filling up his wife's car with gas... the things you'll never see, Shviger.

However, if you truly believe your daughter is being mistreated and does not have the tools to stand up for herself or communicate her needs to her husband, a heart to heart with your daughter might be the better route. Perhaps she can benefit from speaking to a therapist who can teach her better communication skills and how to deal with a husband such as hers.

Signed,
Esther

Dear Esther,

I recently became engaged to a wonderful young man. His mother who is Israeli is insisting I call her "Ima" instead of "Shviger" as she finds the latter to sound harsh and unattractive. I understand her aversion to the name "Shviger" but I am uncomfortable calling her "Ima" as I have a mother B"H and it seems disrespectful to use that title on someone who is not my mother. All the other children-in-law in the family call her Ima and so I feel bad making a fuss about it when everyone else in the family has obliged. What should I do?

Signed,
A Blushing and Cringing Bride

Dear Bride,

It is unfair of your future mother-in-law to demand that you call her Ima. You might decide to gently explain why you are uncomfortable doing so. Together, you can find another name other than Shviger that you are both comfortable with. If you decide to go with this option, I would suggest bringing this up earlier rather than later as I have a friend who never found the right time to broach the subject and is now married over 30 years and has never called her mother-in-law anything. Her mother-in-law wanted to be called Ima, my friend can't get it out of her mouth, so she just calls her "Umm..."

On the other hand, if bringing it up, even gently, gives you heart palpitations, you may just decide to let it go and call her Umm. This is also acceptable, especially in view of the fragile newborn shviger/daughter-in-law relationship which is just naturally prone to hurt feelings and power struggles.

Now a word to the mothers-in-law who want to be called Ima or Mom.

While I understand the aversion to "Shviger," perhaps due to all those negative mother-in-law jokes, I must say, it is so helpful! One thing I love about frumkeit is that there are clear boundaries and relationships are defined. A mother-in-law is not a mother and so she is called differently. Just the mere fact that we call things by their proper names helps us relate to them appropriately.

When you call someone a name more intimate than the relationship demands, it leads to unrealistic expectations and subsequent disappointments. Mothers-in-law, don't throw out the gifts of frum life!

Signed,
Esther

Dear Esther,

When we visit our kids out of town, my husband mutters under his breath that our son-in-law "never" learns. I understand what he is saying. Our son-in-law does his Chitas of course, and daily Rambam, but sitting down with a sefer is just not his default setting. His set of Shas remains almost brand new. For my husband, sitting in front of a sefer and learning out loud is his default setting, he is upset to see that this is not how it is with our (otherwise perfect) son-in-law. I spend a lot of breath and effort pointing out the good in our son-in-law, but my husband is just disappointed because he is not a big learner. I don't want my husband's disappointment to spread to my daughter.

Signed,
Married to Disappointed

Dear MTD,

Is it either your or your husband's place to address your son-in-law directly about this? Absolutely not.

For the sake of your daughter's (and your own) happiness, start focusing on the positive qualities of the people around you in general and those related to you in particular, and those related to you by marriage to your children most especially. If there are behaviors you would like to see implemented by your son-in-law, lead ONLY by example.

As a rule, seek to inspire those around you who are beyond your disciplinary control.

Here's a suggestion for you, MTD, and for all readers who have married children.

Once in a while, turn to your child and, in front of his/her spouse, praise the child-in-law.

For example, you might say to your daughter (in front of your son-in-law), "We feel so blessed to have Shmerel in the family. He has made life so much more pleasant in so many ways [and enumerate]!"

Or say to your son (in front of your daughter-in-law), "I can't believe your wife made us this delicious fresh hot potato kugel just for Friday snacking. She didn't have to do it, but it was extremely nice of her! How did we ever get so lucky in the daughter-in-law department?"

When you get into this habit, you actually enhance your children's sholom bayis with your approval instead of obstructing it with your disapproval.

Signed,
Esther

בס"ד

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