BETWEEN FRIENDS *with* ESTHER

EtiQuette



BY GIVING YOU MY SON AS A HUSBAND, I WAS SURE I'D BE GAINING THE DAUGHTER I NEVER HAD.

The following letter was sent to Esther Etiquette care of the N'shei Chabad Newsletter:

Dear Daughter-in-Law,

This letter is many years in the writing. I never wanted to confront you about this and definitely not in person, however, years have gone by and I think it's time to have my say.

I love reading Esther Etiquette and now I finally wrote to her myself, hoping she will address in her column what I can't say directly to my daughter-in-law.

Twenty-five years ago, we welcomed you into our family. By giving you my son as a husband, I was sure I'd be gaining the daughter I never had. *B"H,* my son has been a good husband, father, provider, and I never told him anything negative about you.

However, now you are entering a new *parshah* in your life. You are starting to marry off my wonderful grandchildren and I would hate for you to feel as hurt and neglected as I do.

How many times in 25 years have you called me (besides the handful of times that you needed to ask me something)?

I know you're busy with your Shlichus, your family, your job, your home, etc. However, it's not like we can bump into each other on the Avenue. You live far away. It would have been nice over the years to have gotten at least a Good Shabbos or a Good Yom Tov call.

I realize that for us it's a little too late to change our ways. I realize that I'm not your mother and that was why I hesitated all these years to call too much. I didn't want to be the "the *shviger*" we all dread having (or being!).

But now that we are getting to the next generation, and your daughter is getting married, maybe mention to your daughter that *IY"H* when she becomes a daughter-in-law, a friendly call to the *shviger* every once in a while is also part of *kibud av va'em*.

Not to mention simple *ahavas Yisroel*.

I am not signing my name as I don't want you to be angry and upset with me and I think that I might be speaking for some other mothers-in-law as well.

I love my grandchildren. They are the best and I want them to do the right thing in their adult lives.

The Shviger

Dear Shviger,

I feel for you! It is so hurtful when we invest in what we think will be a deeply meaningful and satisfying relationship and get less than we wanted, in return. It makes it that much harder when that relationship is a close familial one. I want to try and figure out why you feel so let down and why you feel your daughter-in-law doesn't seem to notice. Perhaps your expectations of a daughter-in-law are much higher than the expectations of a daughter-in-law in her family (not that this excuses her behavior).

I wonder if your daughter-in-law comes from a large family. Perhaps she has seen her brothers marry wives who are pleasant and warm when they are around her family but don't call often. Your daughter-in-law's mother isn't waiting for her daughters-in-law to ring as she is busy 'round the clock fielding calls from her daughters and sons. (This isn't to imply that her mother wouldn't appreciate a call from a daughter-in-law; everyone does! But whether they do or don't call does not consume her.)

Assuming this is the type of family your daughter-in-law comes from, she may not have even known you expected Erev Shabbos and Erev Yom Tov calls. You said you didn't want to call too much because you didn't want to be "that *shviger*." Maybe she thought you didn't want to talk to her too much, either. A

decades-long misunderstanding?

Often, when we take into account the other person's background and perspective, we can be more understanding of their actions and feel less hurt.

Naturally, you want to be significantly involved in your son's life, and his children's lives, and to have a close relationship with his wife. But to want a daughter-in-law to be a daughter to you is asking too much. If that was your hope, you set yourself up for major disappointments. (We discussed this very issue several issues ago, in a column about mothers-in-law who want to be called "Mom." You can read that article now on nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives.)

Esther's Tips for Daughters-in-Law and Mothers-in-Law:

Shvigers: From the start, try and make your daughters-in-law comfortable around you. Hold the advice and certainly never criticize (even though you know those grandkids' brains are being fried from that piece-of-junk computer!). Oh, and you don't need to tell your daughter-in-law how special her husband is. She already thinks so, she chose to marry him! Be helpful when you can. New baby? Send over dinner or take the other kids out. Sincerely compliment her (those go a long way!). I heard my friend's mother-in-law say to her, "The best thing my son ever did was marry you." (Yup, my friend adores her!) And try to remember her birthday.

If you want a close relationship with your son and his family, it will take effort on your part too. You will need to show your son and daughter-in-law that their family is important to you, even though the family comes along with screaming babies, messy toddlers and the sometimes rowdy games of young children. In the earlier years (as the grandkids are growing up) your daughter-in-law might not have the head space or ability to invite you over often and wine and dine you. At this stage, you may need to make your home the center for family get-togethers. Those get-togethers are what keep the family close and send the message to your children and grandchildren that family is a priority. It will not always be this way. As you get older and the chaos in your son's life wanes, "family BBQ time" or Zaidy's birthday party or whatever your occasions are will start being in your children's home and they will probably be as often and as important as you made them.

Daughters-in-Law: Nothing says "I'm thinking about you and you are important" like a phone call. Call your mother-in-law! She will always appreciate it. Make it a habit of dialing that number every Erev Shabbos and Yom Tov. I have cousins who call my grandmother every single Erev Shabbos, no matter where in the world they are. They do this because their mother (the daughter-in-law!) trained them to. When those cousins come home from camp or *yeshivah* (they live in the same city as their grandparents), their first stop is their Bubby and Zaidy's house, to say hello. They also visit Bubby and Zaidy religiously. Those kids now have a wonderful and close relationship with their grandparents. These things don't happen on their own.

Be appreciative of your mother-in-law. If nothing else, she raised your husband. Be respectful of her age and her wisdom (she's been around longer than you!). Do not have unrealistic expectations. Your shviger does not owe you ANYTHING (not a birthday present, not tickets to a simchah, not babysitting, not anything.) Don't be critical of her mothering and grandmothering. To keep yourself in check imagine yourself in 20 years overhearing a daughter-in-law say, "You know why my husband has this flaw? His mother..." All mothers tried their best and no one is perfect. Everyone shows love in their own way. Appreciate the ways your mother-in-law does, and don't focus on the ways she doesn't. Above all, treat her the way you hope your son's wife will treat you one day.

To my letter-writer. I have a prediction to make.

I predict that after your grandchildren begin to get married, and your daughter-in-law waits for those Friday phone calls, she will realize that maybe she didn't set the best example, and she will begin to call you. When she does, accept it as an unspoken apology for the years of neglect.

Also to my letter-writer, I have a favor to ask of you.

You write that your grandchildren are "the best."

I am sure that your daughter-in-law had something to do with that. Would you please contact her in the manner you usually use (whether it's e-mail, telephone, or written note), and thank her for the wonderful, well-brought up grandchildren you think so highly of?

Signed,
Esther Etiquette