BETWEEN FRIENDS *with* ESTHER

EtiQuette



MY TOP 7 TIPS TO THE IN-LAW

Dear Readers,

My inbox gets filled with so many vents about the way a mother-in-law, father-in-law, daughter-in-law, son-in-law or sister-in-law is behaving. The writer generally has no idea what has brought about the mistreatment, but I always wonder what the accused would say if asked for her side of the story. It takes two to tango, so before we villainize our in-laws, let's examine our own behavior, make the necessary changes, and see if that helps our relationships.

One of the hardest adjustments in marriage is the new role of "in-law," especially if you are a person who likes to be liked. I got married when I was young and naïve. A bit of a know-it-all (an oldest!), with strong opinions formed solely on my limited experiences within the walls of my childhood home, I was bordering on amusing to my more generous in-laws and downright irritating to the less tolerant ones. But through trial and error, years of experience and a bit of soul searching, I now have a genuinely warm and close relationship with my husband's family. Though we've covered some of this before, allow me to share my Top 7 tips to the in-law. And then we are moving on!

1 TAKE PRIDE IN YOUR NEW FAMILY

Change your last name happily and use it. You don't need to remind people of your maiden name unless they ask. When you are told your child is a carbon copy of your mother-in-law, smile big and say thank you. Speak highly and respectfully of your in-laws, even when you are not thinking so highly of them. They are *your* family now and deserve your loyalty and protection. And, selfishly, it can only hurt you and your children (not to mention your marriage) to publicize anything negative.

2 YOU ARE NOT THE FAMILY THERAPIST

Believe it or not your husband's family got along just fine, for many years, before you arrived (they even got *you* to marry into them!). You are not the hero swooping in to make them normal. There is nothing that will make your in-laws hate you more than psycho-analyzing them. None of them want your opinion on why Shloime Todres isn't *frum* anymore. If they ask, shrug your shoulders. Even if they beg, you still cannot imagine what might have turned him off. You don't need to be the one to explain to Yentl Dvosha that the reason her marriage is so rocky was because your in-laws were not attentive enough parents. When you are bursting inside, write all your diagnoses and therapeutic cures for your mother-in-law and all her children in your secret diary. At night, when you are anxiously tossing and turning due to your own problems, read an entry about the OCD sister-in-law who doesn't even know she's OCD and relax. At least you are not her.

3 MAKE THE EFFORT TO HAVE A GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR IN-LAWS

If you live in the same city as your in-laws, visit and make plans with them often. Make a point of bringing your children over to their grandparents and invite them to the house for dinner periodically. If you don't live near them, call regularly. Show your sisters-in-law that they matter to you by calling them just to chat and not only when you need a favor. Offer to help your in-laws when they have a *simchah* by hosting a meal, baking a cake, or coming early to set up. If you are newly married, don't get offended when your older sisters-in-law seem to be too busy

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for you. You will one day understand that a house full of kids plus a job makes it very hard to meet for coffee at 10 a.m. on a Tuesday. (To the older sisters-in-law: Reach out to a new sister-in-law. Yeah, they're out of touch and immature, but an overture from you will make their day! And they will grow up, you'll see.)

TALK ABOUT THE AMAZINGNESS OF YOUR FAMILY TO YOUR FAMILY



Not to your-in-laws. They don't care to hear how crazy generous your father was at your sister's wedding, paying for all your tickets *and* your new *sheitel*. There's no need to explain in detail how exceptionally helpful your sisters are when you have a new baby between the breakfast in bed, making all your kids lunches and setting up the nursery A to Z. When you're spending Sukkos at the in-laws, try to avoid gushing about your mother's kugels, cakes, roasts and the number of people she hosts without batting an eyelash. They're not interested at best and at worst will think you are highlighting how unamazing they are to you. They would like to hear what an awesome mother-in-law their mother is for hosting your whole family so graciously for Sukkos or how grateful you are for marrying into such a nice and supportive family. Look for the good and focus on it.

TREAT YOUR HUSBAND LIKE A KING ALWAYS, BUT ESPECIALLY IN FRONT OF HIS FAMILY



It fills every mother with joy when she sees her child being well taken care of by the spouse. Even if you split diaper duty at home, just change the extra diaper at your mother-in-law's. Let your husband sit at the table and chat without being nagged for a pacifier, a drink or "a word with you." When your husband shares an opinion and you don't agree, try to keep it to yourself while in this venue. If you can't, respectfully disagree. Don't say *"you're wrong"* and certainly do not raise your voice. Ever. To anyone. In your in-laws' house.

BE A *MENTSCH*



Your mother-in-law and single sisters-in-law are not your nannies or your maids. When you take your baby out of the highchair that is now caked in smooshed banana with a trail of milk-soaked cereal on the floor, do not casually walk to the sink to wash your baby's hands and face and then disappear. Clean the high chair (if you are planning on cleaning it later, but need to settle a child down for a nap first, tell someone). When your mother-in-law is serving and clearing the table, stop your very important conversation and *help* until she too sits down. Don't assume your 16-year-old sister-in-law is going to watch your kids every Shabbos afternoon while you nap and babysit every Motzoei Shabbos until she gets married. You can ask once in a while, but understand it is a *favor*, not a duty. Treat them the way you would want to be treated.

EXPECT NOTHING AND BE GRATEFUL FOR EVERYTHING



You only have a contract with your husband; anything your in-laws give or do is extra. They do not owe you anything more than John from across the street does, so don't complain when they fall short on your list of their duties (to be your night nurse, and have Bubby and Zaidy sleepovers, and move in for a week so you can vacation in Hawaii sans kids, and mind-read what you want and don't want). You gain nothing but wrinkles and distance when you allow bitterness to seep in.

You will find that people give and show love in different ways and while it may take time to get used to a new currency of love, do not overlook or misname it. Notice and appreciate the ways your in-laws do give.

Wishing all my readers happy and easy relationships that deepen with time,

Esther Etiquette

Esther would like to thank her sisters and "Miami Baby" for their input for this article.