BETWEEN FRIENDS with ESTHER EtiQuette



Dear Esther,

Recently, a member of our family was diagnosed with a dreaded illness and we decided to go to the Ohel as a family and *daven*. We went very late one night to avoid crowds but of course there were still a few people there (it seems it is never completely empty). I was surprised at the number of people who asked us, "Why are you all here?" Obviously it was not a mazel tov; there was no other side, just our immediate family.

I mentioned this to my friend and she replied, "I spent today taking my son to a doctor's appointment. I didn't think it would happen since this doctor is out in New Jersey but we did bump into another Lubavitcher who asked us, 'So why are you here?' I felt like replying, "Well, we're here spending $575 for an out-of-network consultation because we're all in perfect health, and you?!" Esther, you wrote about Facebook and how nothing is private any more. Is this newly acceptable but still dreaded question, "Why are you here?" perhaps part of that syndrome?

Signed,
Private Priva

Dear Priva,

Many people are all too happy to escape their own problems and dive right into another person's private world, if they are allowed to. (It could very well be that the boundaries of privacy are being eroded due to the over-sharing and voyeurism of social media.) Still, I would hope even the most curious would pick up on body language. But, perhaps not. We do live in a culture that is brazen and shameless. It is not uncommon for a person to ask a stranger they meet in the store questions like "Are you married?" "How many kids do you have?" and "What does your husband do?" (all potentially uncomfortable questions) right off the bat! Better conversation starters would be "Have you shopped here before?" "Isn't this a beautiful neighborhood?" "Have you tried this *chummus*?" "I like your scarf, where'd you find it?"

When I am asked a question I don't want to answer, I don't. Recently, I missed a community event. An acquaintance came over and asked me why I wasn't there. (She should have just said, "We missed you!") I answered with a vague, "You know how it goes." And to avoid further interrogation, I continued, "Tell me, how was the event?"

If you are in a doctor's office and you see someone you know who is averting your gaze, let her. She doesn't want you to know she is there and she isn't in the mood to discuss her health issue with you. There is no reason she should have to. If she looks up and smiles, smile back and say hello. If she is not offering any information, don't ask for any. Pick up a magazine and read. That's what all those magazines are there for.

The same etiquette goes for the Ohel. If an entire family is at the Ohel and you are curious to know if there's an engagement, stick around and you'll find out. If there are no l'chaims being said, *mazel tovs* shouted and giddy group pictures being taken, the family is there for a different reason. Be kind enough not to ask what it is. Say a *kapitel Tehillim* for them and walk away quietly.

Signed,
Esther

Dear Esther,

I am so fed up with my brother. A few of my siblings and I live in the same city, including my brother Yossi. We try to get together every so often with our families. All of us make the effort to participate and host these get-togethers except Yossi. He never hosts and, worse, he always has an excuse for why he and his family can't join. It is so dismissive to us siblings. Do we need to include him in our plans anymore? It's hard to keep calling him and have him keep rejecting us.

Signed,
Leah

Dear Leah,

I wouldn't call Yossi and invite him to the parties anymore, but I wouldn't exclude him altogether either. Perhaps you and your siblings could

create a group chat, or WhatsApp, and include him in it. After you and your more involved siblings make the arrangements for the family outing, you could share the time and place of the gathering on the group chat. This way Yossi knows where "family day" is taking place and has the possibility of joining, and you can avoid the hurt and awkwardness of making that rejection-begging phone call.

Signed,
Esther

Dear Esther,

My husband's brother and my sister's husband were in business together for many years. Recently, they had a falling out that resulted in a splitting of the business and a lot of bad blood. They do not talk to each other anymore. My husband and I are caught in the middle of this and we don't know what position we should take. Obviously, I am more sympathetic to my sister's husband and my husband takes his brother's side. This is proving to be difficult on our marriage and families. It's an awful mess.

Signed,
Malky in the Middle

Dear Malky,

Just because your sister and brother-in-law had a falling out with their partners doesn't mean you need to have a falling out with your in-laws. You need to be sympathetic to your sister's situation without getting involved in the details of who's right and wrong. If this is proving too difficult, you can sensitively ask your sister and brother-in-law to make this subject taboo. Do not discuss it with either side, as it will ultimately damage relationships in your family. This is a time when *moach shalit al halev* is needed. (The mind must control the heart.) Naturally, a sibling feels for his own sibling. You and your spouse each want to protect and defend your own blood. Only making the decision to stay out of this situation will keep both sides of the family intact. Eventually, this drama will be over and both sides will move forward with their lives. Don't allow yourself to be the one left holding the broken stick.

Signed,
Esther ■

