BETWEEN FRIENDS *with* ESTHER
EtiQuette



Dear Esther,

At a wedding I bumped into my sister's friend. In middle of our conversation she said, "Congratulations for your sister! Aren't you proud?" I had no idea what I was supposed to be proud of. My sister's friend clued me in that my sister had landed a big promotion at her job. Apparently it was a big deal, but somehow my sister "forgot" to tell me her big news. I am hurt that my sister kept this from me and I'm also wondering why. This was a significant change in her life and we have spoken a number of times since she was promoted, so it wasn't an accident. After I was made aware of the news I asked her, "How's the job going?" and she responded with a vague "*Baruch Hashem*." What am I to make of this?

Signed,
A Shut-out Sister

Dear Sister,

You've got me thinking about the nature of secrets and why people keep them, even among family. Your sister was withholding information from you. Let's figure out why.

Why do we mislead people or avoid their questions (as your sister did with her evasive "*Baruch Hashem")*, sometimes even lying outright, to hide a truth from someone else?

People keep secrets for one of two reasons: 1. To protect themselves or 2. To protect someone else.

Since it is not our place to divulge the details of someone else's life, it is always noble to keep another person's secret.

But let's discuss our own secrets that we keep to protect ourselves. It is true that we need to protect ourselves from the prying eyes and blabbing mouths of the greater world. We cannot trust just anybody with our private information. But when that mistrust extends even to our own family, that is sad. Who better to share our triumphs and woes with than our siblings? If we cannot be certain that our siblings would bear our burdens without judgment and celebrate our joys wholeheartedly, then we need to examine those relationships. Because you can't be close with people you don't trust.

Sharing demands vulnerability. Vulnerability demands safety. For people to be open with one another, they must feel safe with one another; safe from judgments and competition. Ideally, a family, especially the large and loving families that we are familiar with, should be a safe space for its members. Each sibling should instinctively know that the others love them unconditionally, will protect them at all costs and do not view them as competitors. Sounds easy, right? As most of us know, it's not. Unfortunately there are many families where the siblings compete with each other to be "the most important" or "the most successful" and that creates fissures in the relationships. If we are competitors, we cannot truly be happy for each other's successes, because the success of each member is always viewed in the context of his or her siblings. If we are more successful, we may fear sharing our success, knowing how it might be received by our siblings. On the flip side, we also cannot share our troubles, as that would tarnish the image of success and competency we are working so hard to keep up. So, we spend our lives keeping up images to the only people with whom we should be able to let our guards down. Because we don't really feel safe with them.

Your sister must be one of those people who is wary of her own siblings.

She may be worried you will receive her happy news with jealousy; she may be the type of person who receives other people's happy news with jealousy and assumes others do the same.

Don't make this about you and the fact that she didn't share with you. Show her how genuinely happy you are for her.

Regardless of the reasoning, you have options. Though much of our attitude toward our siblings depends on the family dynamic with which we were raised, there is much that you, as a self-aware and mature adult, can do. Start by picking up the phone and telling your sister, in a friendly and open way, that you heard about her promotion and you want her to know that you are happy for her and proud of her. Don't make this about you and the fact that she didn't share with you. Show her how genuinely happy you are for her and how you do not view her success in the context of your success and failures. Even if you have to work through layers and years of mistrust, keep up this behavior with your siblings. Hopefully, this will rub off on your entire family and help you become a happier, stronger unit. And even if it doesn't rub off on your siblings, this behavior will rub off on your children. It is certainly within your power to create an environment for your own family where everyone feels safe enough to be vulnerable, and ensure that your children become, and remain, a close, loving and mutually supportive unit.

Signed,
Esther

Dear Esther,

I am in middle of trying to marry off my daughter and going through the lists of references on prospective boys' profiles. Recently, I had an experience that left me feeling queasy. My husband and I were finding out about a young man named Chaim and called the person who was listed as his *mashpia* to find out about him. We introduced ourselves and said we would like to ask him about Chaim. The *mashpia* said, "Look, I know you, so I'll tell you the truth. He's a nice boy, but honestly, you could get better for your daughter. He's really nothing special and the father is an extremely difficult man who can't get along with his own children." I am appalled that a *mashpia* had no problem betraying confidences like this. I feel so sorry for the young man who trusted his *mashpia* with confidential family issues and that is now being used against him. I think references need to be taught what their job IS and what it is NOT. Thank you in advance, Esther.

Signed,
A Kind Inquisitor

Dear Kind,

There are two issues here. One is the behavior of a reference. And the second is the behavior of a *mashpia*.

First, I will take you up on your suggestion and give a little "Reference 101" crash course.

As someone's reference, your duty is to present him in the most favorable light. He has trusted you to be his advocate in the *shidduch* process and your loyalty needs to lie with him. That means answering questions truthfully but with a positive spin, the way you would answer questions about yourself in a job interview. Accentuate the positive qualities and steer the questioner in those directions. It is not your place to make the caller aware of any issues that he or she does not know. If you find you are unable to protect the person you are a reference for, ask to be taken off the list. You could say that you never know the right thing to say and fear you aren't the best person for the job. Trust me, you'll be crossed off faster than you can say "*L'chaim*."

If you feel the person in question is withholding serious and important information (such as his own illness), then address that person about it directly. Perhaps he was directed by a Rav to bring it up only once dating begins.

What happened in the case you describe is much worse than just a reference doing the wrong thing. It is a *mashpia* abusing his position of power to hurt someone whom he is meant to help. One can only hope that most *mashpias* understand the seriousness of that and are respectful and discreet with the information they are privy to.

Tip to profile-writing parents: Before putting someone down as a reference, ask them if they are up to the task. This might inspire loyalty.

Signed,
Esther