BETWEEN FRIENDS *with* ESTHER

EtiQuette



False generosity is when you are generous at someone else's expense.

Dear Esther,

My adult son's computer was left out on the kitchen table, open to his Gmail account. I chanced upon an email that I shouldn't have (with a little help from my clicking fingers). It was an email exchange between him and his sister and, well, I'm their mother and I wanted to know what they were emailing. So I sat down with my mid-morning cup of coffee, read through their emails and found out some nasty things he says about me! I won't bore you with their long list of complaints and criticism but it was bad enough that my coffee tasted salty. I feel so bad! After all I've done for them, THIS is how they feel about me?

Signed,
Started out Snoopy and Ended up Sad

Dear Snoop,

They say curiosity killed the cat and what you don't know can't hurt you. Well. Your curiosity killed your chances of never being hurt by sentiments your son would never share with you. Which reminds me of another cliché that is apropos: What others think of you is none of your business. We are all entitled to our privacy, and emails, text messages and phone calls are assumed to be exclusive. I would not recommend confronting your son about his exchange with your daughter because he will inevitably ask, "Why were you reading my private emails?" and there's no good answer to that. You can console yourself with the probability that at the time he wrote the emails he was upset about something (children's expectations of their parents are limitless, even into adulthood) and generally does not feel this way. (Don't you sometimes speak disparagingly about people in a way that does not reflect your true feelings about them, which are generally positive?) Just let this one go and save yourself future heartache by keeping your eyes and ears focused on your business.

Readers: Respect your feelings and your privacy, and respect others' feelings and their privacy. Remember to sign out of your email accounts if others will be using that computer. If you answer a call on speaker phone, alert the caller immediately, so that he does not say something he would want only you to hear. And in general, don't stick your nose in other people's business. Don't listen in on a *shadchan*'s conversation or peek at your coworker's paycheck. You're only asking for heartache.

A 60-year-old friend of mine confided in me recently, "I knew my kids were preparing a surprise for my 60th and I couldn't resist reading an email of theirs that I saw on the family computer about it. I wish I hadn't. Now, every time I look at a certain daughter, I can't help but know that she was the one who wanted to spend less on me."

Mendel Notik, who spent a lot of time in the home of the Rebbe and Rebbetzin, once answered the Rebbe's doctor's call. He had a short conversation in English with the doctor and then walked over to the Rebbetzin to hand her the phone. "It is Dr. Weiss," he told the Rebbetzin. "If I would have known it was Dr. Weiss I would have come to the phone immediately. I thought you were talking to Sholom Gansburg." Mendel replied, "But I was talking in English, I always talk to Sholom in Yiddish." The Rebbetzin said, "I was taught in my father's house how one can be present and yet not hear."

Signed,
Esther

Dear Esther,
A friend and I met for lunch and she shared something with me and then requested that I not tell it to my husband. I have never been asked to keep something from my husband before and honestly it makes me uncomfortable to be asked to do that. I know my husband does not need the information, but still it feels a bit wrong to me. What are your thoughts, Esther?

Signed,
A Wondering Wonderful Wife

Dear Wonderful,
Whether or not I agree with the notion of secrets within a marriage, she should have prefaced her secrets with the request that you keep them from your husband. Then you could have decided if you wanted to hear them under those conditions. Requesting that you not tell your husband after the conversation is unfair. Tell your friend: "My husband and I don't keep secrets from each other. There is no reason for me to share what you told me with him now, but in the future, please understand that whatever you share with me could be shared with my husband unless we agree ahead of time that it's important that I don't."

There are times when a husband or wife will choose not to share a particular piece of information. Certainly, counselors and *mashpias* shouldn't share information they are told with their spouses. Even if you are not a counselor or *mashpia*, not everything must be shared (perhaps it would be *untznius*, or fueling slander). But an outsider should not be the one dictating what is shared in our marriages. Once someone demands that you keep something from your spouse, it obstructs the exclusivity of marriage. That is not healthy.

Signed,
Esther





Dear Esther,
My grandmother has a lovely, large summer home in the Catskills that the whole family enjoys. There are a lot of us and it takes some serious scheduling on a shared Google doc for each family and couple to have the chance to escape the city and relax in Bubby's beautiful place with the sparkling swimming pools. We have agreed on a first-come-first-serve basis of up to a week at a time per family. This year my cousin and I both wanted to go the same week. She penciled in first and so she got the preferred week. Yesterday, she mentioned that her family is not going after all as her husband can't get off work then. I told her, "We'll go then, we were planning on going later but I would rather go then!"

My cousin said, "Oh, I'm so sorry; my sister-in-law is going instead of us. I gave her my week." I was shocked! Esther, her sister-in-law is not one of Bubby's grandchildren. She is Bubby's grandchild's husband's sister. I don't think my cousin should be offering Bubby's house around; a guest doesn't invite guests, correct? What should I do about this?

Signed,
Pool Dreaming

Dear Dreamer,
Although I am not one for tattling, in this particular case I would. Not to Bubby (don't bother an older women with such things), but to your parents. The reason is because it is important for your cousin to understand that Bubby's house is not hers, but Bubby's. Bubby has graciously invited her children and grandchildren to enjoy it whenever they please. She has not given her children and grandchildren the right to extend her invitation to whomever they please. If they do, the house will become Lubavitch's house rather than the family house as every member of the family has relatives beyond this family who they can invite, and I can assure you that if every grandchild is inviting cousins and in-laws to partake in Bubby's Free Summer Home, Bubby's place will become trashed and never available. And your cousin won't like it at all when every cousin adopts her false sense of generosity (false generosity is when you are generous at someone else's expense). So, tell your parents. Let the older generation lay down the law. Enjoy Bubby's house and send her pictures from there so she enjoys you being there too!

Signed,
Esther