BETWEEN FRIENDS with ESTHER

EtiQuette

Dear Esther,

I am once again finding myself in a sticky situation both literally and figuratively. My children have arrived home and are jumping off the couches with gooey red food coloring dripping down their chins as their little bodies try to absorb the ridiculous amounts of toxic sugars and preservatives just gifted to them by their loving grandparents. Bags, boxes and wrappers of games, books, *nosh*, clothes and the latest mind-numbing electronics have littered my front hallway and you can be sure that half the pieces to the new games and interest in those fancy gadgets will be long lost come morning. After all, my kids know to expect new piles of stuff next time Bubby and Zaide take them out. And so, after packing lunches, driving carpool and my two Monday morning coffees I will have to attempt to tackle the fresh piles of grandparents' love gone wild and figure out what to do with all the new toys and things we have no need nor room for in our cozy little house.

These are not my parents. They are my husband's parents. How can I respectfully tell my in-law that it's too much? There is no room in my house for all the toys. Moreover, I don't want my kids to be spoiled rotten from teeth to character. It's perfectly okay, in fact it's better, for them not to have EVERY new item on the market.

How can I stop the gift overload?

Signed,
Loathing the Love

Dear Love,

Talk about American first world problems! From your letter I am sensing two frustrations. 1. The type of gifts being given like electronics and junk food. 2. The overload.

I think you (or better yet your husband, in front of you) could respectfully ask your in-laws to steer clear of electronics and treats with food coloring. If you do not want them in your home, however, I wouldn't instruct them in amounts. Your children are fortunate to have generous and attentive grandparents who enjoy showering their grandchildren with gifts. Don't worry about them getting spoiled by Bubby and Zaide. Only you and your husband can be guilty of that as the primary guardians of your children (by demanding nothing of them, failing to teach them responsibility and *mentchlichkeit).* If you find your house bursting with too many presents, use it as an opportunity to teach your children the gift of giving. Each time new gifts from Bubby and Zaide arrive, you and your children can fill a box of older gifts and pass them on to a school, shelter or needy family. Your children may take better care of the things they have lost interest in when they see they are being passed on and used and appreciated by others. But most importantly they will learn that whatever advantages and gifts they have showered on them can and should be extended to others.

Signed,
Esther



Dear Esther,
My friend is going through a difficult time right now. I reached out to her via text (I didn't want to bother her with a phone call, in case that would be intrusive) and wrote "I'm so sorry for you. Let me know if there is anything I can do." She replied "Thanks, I don't need your pity." Where did I go wrong?

Signed,
Sympathetic Simi

Dear Simi,
Pity and empathy are often confused with each other but to the person on the receiving end they are starkly different. Pity gazes down at the sufferer, takes note of the pain and then goes home to count her blessings. "I am so sorry for you" leaves out its implicit afterthought of "I'm so happy it's not me." It is a pitying sentiment that separates the sympathizer from the sufferer and reminds her that YOU (not me) are who I feel sad for. Few people are strengthened or comforted by pity.

Empathy, on the other hand, is being able to make the sufferer's pain your own pain so that you can genuinely say "I was very sad to hear what happened." Generally, empathy will lead to actions that alleviate the suffering in some way (whether it is time, money or effort). When a person is struggling, empathy can be the lifeline that reminds her that she is not alone. We naturally do feel the pain of some others. Our children's pain, or a parent's or sibling's, is often our pain. But the more distant the relationship, the harder it is to empathize because we aren't as connected to him or her. This is the challenge of *v'ahavata l'reiacha kamocha*. When we focus on the truth that we are all actually strongly connected to one another, we can empathize with another person who we naturally might feel nothing toward.

I would also like to point out that the text "Let me know if I can do anything" is merely a finger exercise. It doesn't mean anything as it puts the burden of initiation on the sufferer to reach out and ask you to do something that you might not even be able to do (assuming she has the headspace to think of things she needs anyway). It is always better to decide what specifically you can do and then offer it. For example, "I'd love to send over a meal, is Wednesday a good day?" or "Let me pick up Monday carpools for you." You will find your offers of help to be appreciated and well received this way.

Signed,
Esther

Dear Esther,
My 13-year-old daughter has a cell phone that I check every night (this was a condition to allowing her to have one). Recently I saw a conversation between a few girls texting about a friend of theirs and the trouble she is up to. I was surprised to read where this girl was going and the people she is hanging out with. I was sure her parents were unaware and if it was my daughter, I'd want to know! With my daughter's knowledge, I called the mother of the girl and said, "I have a policy that I check my daughter's phone at night and recently saw a conversation that included some information about your daughter. Just thought I'd let you know that your daughter..." The mother quickly hung up and then called me back the next day to tell me none of it was true. She accused my daughter and her friends of spreading false rumors about her child. But her daughter was actually seen in those places with those people. I was so stunned, I didn't know what to say and so I said nothing but I do think I need to respond. What should I say to her?

Signed,
Meddling in the Teen Scene

Dear Meddling,
There are those parents who care as much about the image of their children as they do about their children themselves. This mother may be one of those who will go to great lengths (even villainize your daughter) to preserve her daughter's reputation. Chances are, she knows the information is true, she knows your daughter isn't spreading rumors, but doesn't want to face that truth...

...or at least not with you. Very likely, she is hearing you, she is grateful to know, and she is dealing with it *but doesn't want to admit that to you*, because she is protective of her daughter and embarrassed and wounded about the whole thing.

Or maybe she needs time to integrate this painful news.

In this situation I would just say, "I am so happy to hear that it isn't true. Have a great day," and you've done all that is expected of you.

Signed,
Esther