



UNDERSTANDING PARENTAL ALIENATION

An interview with Dr. Abe Worenklein

Parental alienation is a tragedy that hurts children as well as families as a whole—but it is a man-made tragedy. When one parent in a divorced couple chooses to drive a wedge between the child and the other parent, the damage can scar that child for life, causing everything from anxiety and depression to suicidal tendencies and a problem with alienation that extends to the next generation.

"It's a serious issue that affects too many families," Dr. Meir Wikler, a psychotherapist and family counselor in private practice in Brooklyn and Lakewood, told *Ami*. "It's usually an outgrowth of the conflict that ended the marriage to begin with."

Dr. Wikler said that there is a heavy body of literature looking at the effects of divorce on children. "One conclusion of every study that I've seen is that more than the divorce itself, it is the way that the parents deal with the divorce that has the greatest impact on the children." That fact is something parents must know, he said. "Education is the best prevention of alienation."

Our community has seen a rise in the number of divorces, Dr. Wikler said. But he also pointed out that there has been a rise in awareness of the problems that parents can cause their children during divorce, including alienation.

To understand the manifestations and mechanisms of parental alienation, we spoke with Dr. Abe Worenklein, a clinical and forensic psychologist in private practice in Montreal and a professor at Dawson College and a lecturer at Concordia University. Dr. Worenklein is an expert on parental alienation who has served as an expert witness hundreds of times in family court cases.

BY YOSSI KRAUSZ

What is parental alienation?

Let's start by talking about the difference between parental alienation and parental estrangement. These are two terms that are used. Estrangement is when a child is against seeing the non-residential parent as a result of things that realistically turned off the child towards that parent. It's not because of the influence of the other parent; it's because of that parent.

An example would be two girls who refused to see their father. They were brought to me for evaluation for a court proceeding. When I questioned them they said, "Why should we want to see our father every second weekend? He either sleeps all day or he's on the computer. He doesn't do anything with us. He puts down our mother the entire time we are with him. We don't want to go see him because we have nothing to do with him and we're tired of hearing him blasting our mother." That's estrangement. They have a legitimate reason.

Parental alienation is when there is no legitimate reason. It's basically when the child has been manipulated to go against the parent. Dr. Richard Gardner coined the term parental alienation syndrome, and he lists eight particular symptoms of it:

- 1) A campaign of denigration.
- 2) A display of inconsistent, illogical, weak or absurd rationalizations given by the child for devaluing the target parent.
- 3) The child uses terminology, phrasing, or incidents that are inappropriate or beyond the child's capability. "I don't want to go to my father because before I was even born my father was mean to my mother." How could they know that?

They use complicated terms. "I don't want joint custody." This was actually from a five-year-old kid I saw.

I said, "What do you mean by joint custody?"

"You know, joint custody."

I said, "I know what it is, but I'd like to make sure we're talking about the same thing."

And then the kid says to me, "Well, if you don't know about joint custody you shouldn't be doing this kind of work."

The kid didn't know what joint custody was; he just heard about it.

4) A lack of ambivalence towards either parent. One parent can't do anything wrong. He does everything right. The other parent can't do anything right. It's black and white. There's a lack of mixed feelings.

5) The adult says, "The child has rights. The decision was the child's."

6) The presence of unconditional, unquestioning support, no matter what that child does. Whatever the

aligned parent says is right.

7) A lack of feelings of guilt or remorse towards the target parent. Even though they're stepping on the target parent, they have no guilt or remorse.

8) Not only don't they want anything to do with the parent who was alienated, it generalizes to anything to do with the target parent. For example, they include their grandparents, the parents of that parent; they don't want anything to do with them either. They don't want anything to do with that parent's friends or profession.

I often say to the court when I have a case like this: If the alienating parent would love the children half as much as he or she hates the other parent, the kids would be in great shape.

The long-term effects of alienation

It's emotional abuse. These children have trouble trusting others. They have low self-esteem. Why? Because I come from my mother and father. And you tell me my mother's a crook or my father's a crook. Let me give you an example. An eight-year-old child whose mother was part of a cult told me when I did the evaluation: My mother told me my father was the son of Satan. I asked her how does this make you feel? She told me it made me feel terrible because that means I'm the granddaughter of the Satan. It has to affect them. A child thinks, I'm the child of my mother and father. If you tell me there's nothing good about one of them, it's got to affect me. We need to recognize that a child's identity comes from both his parents, and if you put down one parent it will ultimately affect the child.

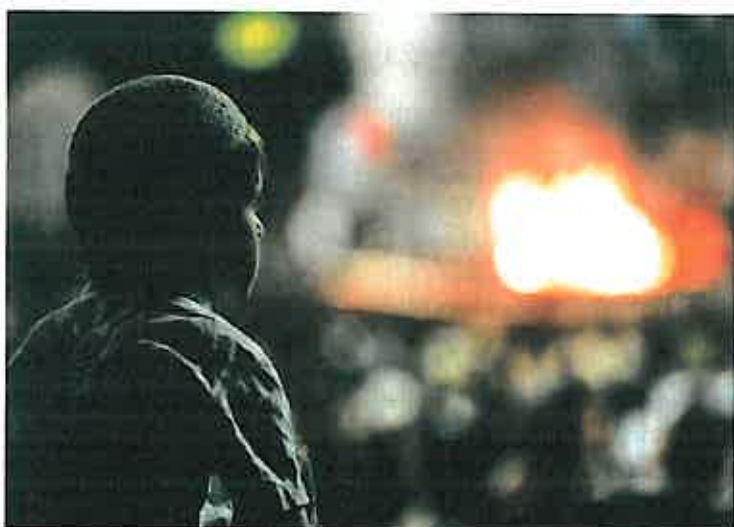
We find these children have a lot of other behavioral disturbances. Research has shown they're more likely to have other kids alienated from them. They have difficulties in relationships. They have difficulties in processing information and they have distorted perceptions of reality. These children also suffer from guilt and shame when they realize what they did to the target parent. We find they have a higher incidence of depression. They're more likely to experience divorce. They're more likely to engage in substance abuse to ease the pain.

The core of alienation

There is a judge in Canada named John Gomery and what he said was brilliant. He wrote in a decision: Hatred is not an emotion that comes naturally to a child; it has to be taught. In this case the person who has taught that hate to his children is their father. They'd be better off if he were removed as an influence on their development until they're better able to withstand and reject his negative attitude. Defendant has deliberately poisoned the

minds of his children against the mother they formerly loved and needed. In the court's opinion, a father who would act in this way represents a grave and persistent danger to the mental and emotional health of his children. That was one of the first such judgments, at least in Canada.

When we look at parental alienation it is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. The parent who is doing the alienation will reject the child if the child doesn't agree with him or her. He or she will isolate the child, the child is terrorized, the child is corrupted, the child is verbally assaulted, threatened with abandonment, told the target parent does not love him or never loved him, the child is told the target parent is unworthy of the child's love, personal details are shared. You have a



young kid who is brainwashed against the other parent.

The messages of alienation

When you look at alienation there's a three-part message:

1. The alienating parent is the only parent who cares.
2. The child needs the alienating parent to feel safe or feel good.
3. The targeted parent is dangerous, does not love the child and must be disallowed to maintain the child's love and approval.

It could be done so subtly. A father takes the kids out and wants to buy them an ice cream and the kids say no, no, no, we brought money for it. You brought money? Why? Mommy gave me a bunch of quarters in case we have to make an emergency phone call if something happens and also gave us money so you don't have to buy anything for us.

Brian Ludmir, a lawyer in Toronto, says that the alienating parent never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity. In other words, they always do.

The thinking of a child

The big problem is that these kids can't think critically. They just accept what they are being told.

I want to emphasize that a child who is alienated often feels that the love he or she gets from the parent doing the alienation is conditional. Let's say a mother alienates against the father. By the way, in the past, a decade or two ago, it was primarily mothers who'd alienate against fathers. Today, I see fathers and mothers who both engage in it.

The child thinks the alienated parent will love me no matter what I do, but my other parent—I'd better side with him, because if not, he or she will write me off. In fact, the child is right. We do find that consistently the love from such a parent is conditional love.

The effects of alienation can be disastrous because the children doubt their own perceptions and therefore comply with the alienating parent. He's uncomfortable with his own perception of reality and decision-making and his critical thinking is affected. The target parent has to understand that it is necessary for the child to learn the real truth.

Here in Ontario, when a child is alienated by one parent, Protective Services steps in. They look into it, they make the child go to therapy, they make the child go to workshops for deprogramming children. There's one very good one in British Columbia started by Dr. Richard Warshak and Drs. Randy and Deirdre Rand. They are effective because they teach the child critical thinking, and the fact of the matter is that's what's important, that's what the child is not allowed to do.

I do evaluations constantly, and unfortunately it is increasing in our community. The *rabbanim* have to be aware of the possibility of alienation and they have to be aware of the difference between alienation and estrangement.

Themes of alienation

Stanley Clawar and Brynne Rivlin published a study for the American Bar Association in which they found that there were 24 different themes used by alienating parents. And what is wonderful is that today, since I'm aware of the 24 themes, I can ask children questions tapping each and every one of the 24 themes. It's very powerful for the court when they see that. It's very clear for the court when a kid has been brainwashed and has been programmed.

We know the themes. There are cases where a child opens his parents' wedding album and finds that the alienated parent had been cut out all the photos. It's a denial of existence. The body language. The child isn't told anything that is going on in the other parent's life. The child is not allowed to have a picture of the parent in the room. We had a case where, despite the hostil-

ity, the mother and father still used the same cleaning lady. She told the mother that the father has a picture of the mother on top of a dart board where the kid could throw darts at it.

There are indirect attacks where, when the kid says something about the alienated parent, the other one starts yawning or leaves the room. And they put down everything the other parent does. They talk with the kid about "Do you want to spend more time with me? You seem much happier when you don't go there. You could've had so much more fun if you wouldn't have had to go here and there."

Interpreting alienation

Often parents come to court and one parent claims it's alienation and the other claims it's estrangement. And often they brainwash the kid to believe certain things happened that did not happen. The professional who is consulted needs to be a *mumcheh*, not just to know the difference between alienation and estrangement but to know how to evaluate it.

When you take a look at the whole issue, children have different reactions to alienation and brainwashing, and you have to be aware of it. You have to see the risk factors, the signs of distress, the behaviors and parent-child relationships, and you need to know the themes used by alienating parents and ask the child the proper questions.

What happens when one parent is abusive?

When there's a legitimate reason for the child not to want to go to the parent, that's not alienation—that's estrangement.

There could be supervised access. It could be the abusive parent gets professional help. The goal is to get the parent better so the child has a relationship with both parents.

Is there alienation less harmful if the child was a baby at the time of the divorce and never knew the alienated parent?

Yes. It's a bit different. But it would be the same effect in terms of identity.

How can you get alienating parents to stop?

With programs like Family Bridges, where children are taught to use critical thinking, not to accept what's being said about the parent. I've referred quite a few kids there—the results are incredible.

By the way, this particular program usually will come to the city where you are. They do many things with the child and parent, and they have a separate two-day workshop with the alienating parent. What they focus on a lot is teaching the kids to think critically and pointing out things that are a *stirah*—what the parents say and what it is in reality—so they can see it and reconcile it.

How should the alienated parent respond to the alienation?

It depends on whether it's mild, moderate or severe alienation. I tell parents: Always, always write to your child. Try to reach them by phone. When you write them or send them a birthday present or Chanukah present, make sure to send it certified so you have a signature. Because when they get older they may say you never tried to reach us, that's what Totty or Mommy said—you don't care about us. But it's so important that the parent who has been alienated should not give up, should persist, should send letters, should make copies of letters they sent so they can say, 'What do you mean I never wanted you? I sent this letter here; I sent this; it was returned.' Do not give up, ever. Continue.

What is the role of the step-parents in alienation?

Sometimes, I'm not saying it's often, a step-parent wants to replace biological parents and they may also do some of the alienation. Also, the biological parent now living with the step-parent may do it for the same reason: They want it to be "a normal, happy family" and so they do not want the child to go to the other parent every second weekend or whatever it may be.

That this makes for a "normal, happy family" is not substantiated by the research. A child must be able to have both of his biological parents, even if they're divorced and there is a step-parent. There's no reason not to accept reality. Yes, I'll always be your mother and your father will always be your father, but I'm getting married and you'll have a stepfather who's not your biological father, and you should have a good relationship with him as well.

A lot of parents feel threatened by the fact that there's a step-parent, and they therefore try to turn the child against the step-parent. A child can be a very healthy child if the parents would grow up and consider what is best for the child and not what is best for them.

The bottom line

I'd emphasize that it is extremely important for parents to recognize that it is they who have a disagreement, their marriage didn't work out. But by turning the kids against the the other parent you're creating potentially great difficulties in this child. It's been substantiated by the research.

You should tell your child, "He's your father. He's always going to be your father. He loves you. I didn't get along well with him. However, he's your father and you have to give him *kavod*." Or, "She's your mother and you have to give her *kavod*."

In terms of *middos* and teaching your child what is right and what is wrong, why are you teaching your kids to hate somebody, to hate the person who created them? ●

A Plea for the Parents

The following is the song sung by Yoely at the Keiravtanu Shabbaton, which went viral, translated from Yiddish:

I know what it means to miss a blessing of a father.
It took me 16 years
until I merited to once again receive blessings
from my dear father.

Sometimes there is a time, a situation,
when for some reason
a father or mother isn't allowed to see their children.

Sometimes there is a time
when even if parents live at home
there is a lack of a connection
and the kids grow up without a father or a mother.
So, when such a situation is known to me
it touches my heart very deeply
and when I see so many men and women getting
together

just to bring a closer relationship
between parents and children, children to parents
it fills my heart with fire.

As a badchan, I get to do mitzvah tanzten.
It sometimes happens that I'm told
I should call so and so up like this or that.

There are some who really know how to praise or
insult an individual.

As I am very sensitive to this matter
I react to it in a very personal way,
I can't allow someone to be degraded,
it can't happen under my watch.

A few years ago
I was called as a badchan for a mitzvah tanz
and I was given the information for those being
called up.

It is getting closer to the wedding day,
I called up the person in charge
and I tell him

I already have all the information,
but the father of the chasan
is not on the list
and he is one of the most important figures to be
called up to dance with his son and daughter-in-law.

He tells me:
Yoely, I forgot to tell you
you will not call up the father
because the father and son are not on speaking
terms.

The parents are divorced
and the son is estranged from his father..
you won't be calling him up.

I said what are you talking about, I must call him
up.

He said: The son really hates his father
and if you will call him up you will really cause
pain to the groom on the day of his wedding

which is the greatest cruelty, to use G-d's name
for that.

I tell him: I understand
I know where you are coming from,
I understand even more than you think
Please forgive me

but I cannot be the badchan at this wedding.
He says: but Yoely, you don't know the full story.

I said: Of course I do
more than you will ever understand...
and I will not be able to badchan,
please forgive me

and find someone else to moderate the mitzvah
tanz,
maybe somebody else will have a heart to this.

He says: Yoely, You don't know the story.
You don't know the full story.
You don't understand

I said: Oh how I do.
But he says: it is so close to the wedding
I can't book someone else now,
it is so close to the wedding
please be a mentsch.

I said: It is the furthest from being a mentsch!
If you want me to be badchan at this wedding
give me the information on the father
and let me call him up to dance.

He said: You know what?
Call him up...
because, after all, he is paying for the entire wed-
ding!!!

So, call him up, but in a cold way, two minutes,
you don't want to make it uncomfortable for the
chasan

I said: Okay, I will see what I can do.
I prepare
something short enough
not to make the chasan uncomfortable
but enough to be somehow okay

When it comes the turn for the chasan's father
I call him up quick and short
I see all the askanim looking at me with those
eyes

as if to say
Nu? Make it quick, you have already crossed the
red line.

and I am daring to say another line and another
line
and as I am concluding the father's introduction
I see a broken Yiddele from the other end of the
wedding hall,

he gets up and gets closer and closer,
no one gets up for him,

the chasan gets up
and the kallah
and the father is dancing just for a minute or two.
He looks like he was also afraid of the askanim.
For a few minutes he holds his son's hands and
dances.

They don't ever look into each others eyes,
the son looks around right to left,
everywhere but into his father's eyes.
And so does the father.

He looks down to the floor.
He finishes dancing after a few minutes,
nobody joins in the dance,
they let the short dance fade out.

He finishes,
goes back to his place at the end of the hall,
everyone is breathing a sigh of relief,
baruch Hashem, the crisis is over.

My heart is torn
and I don't know if I could ever fix it.
Soon after I am calling up the father of the kallah
with beautiful rhymes

with parables and short warm stories
and everyone is emotional,
everyone dances around father and daughter and
it is beautiful.

My heart is broken as I see the stark contrast.
Next in line is to call up the chasan to dance with
the kallah.

Instead of singing about how great the chasan is
and in which yeshivah he learned
and what a great baalas middos the kallah is
I sing about what it says in the Holy Zohar
that grandparents come down from heaven

and they look at how their prayers to have good
and healthy children were answered.
And it says in our holy sefarim
that not only do the grandparents come down
from heaven

but also the souls of your future children are here
as well
and they are looking up to their future parents.

What are you praying for now?
Are you praying for your strong love towards us
all our lives?

Are you praying about our love to you all your
lives?
Are you praying that we always feel comfortable
with each other?

Are you praying that you will always see Yid-
dishe nachas from us?
I kept on singing about the relationship of the
chasan and kallah

and their future children,
 I have no idea what an effect this has
 until I finish my song.
 Usually, now the chasan will take his kallah's
 hand and they start dancing,
 but this time he motions to her to wait for a
 minute.
 He asks his father to come back
 His father comes to him
 but this time there is no fear.
 He grabs his father's hands
 and this time he looks into his father's eyes,
 they look into each others eyes,
 they don't see anything around them
 as they fall onto each other's shoulders.
 I look around and I see
 that everyone feels what is happening here in the

air
 and besides these few askanim
 everyone has wet eyes
 as he finishes dancing.
 He tells his kallah
 now we can dance with each other.
 I was thinking then
 that we have the same relationship with our
 Father in Heaven,
 how many kids are sadly roaming the streets?
 How many are sadly convinced that our Father
 hates them?
 How many believe that they hate our Father in
 Heaven?

Master of the World, just look into our eyes,
 our eyes are so filled with pain
 so much pain, pain filled with so much sorrow
 of thousands of years
 Just look into our eyes
 and you will see how we return to you,
 Ribbono Shel Olam.

* * *

I told this story someplace.
 The next morning someone calls me

and he greets me as Dr. Lebovits.
 I said this must be a wrong number.
 he said no, it is the right party.
 I want you to know
 that I was divorced and my son
 was not allowed to see me for the past five years.
 Last year I remarried
 and I got back my son
 but he acts so strange towards me.
 We spend thousands for therapists and psychia-
 trists,
 they try everything
 but he is still so strange,
 but last night when you told this story
 I was sitting there with my son.
 Right afterwards he called me "Daddy" for the
 first time in five years,
 I want to repay you
 I refused.
 I saw that this story has such an effect
 I decided to repeat this story further.

My dear brothers and sisters:
 Whenever you witness
 that a father or mother is not allowed to see their
 child,
 do whatever you could possibly do
 to return the parents to the children
 because I could attest that
 every child needs both a father and a mother
 and I don't want any child to have to wait 16
 years like I had to.
 My precious brothers and sisters:
 Even if you were never separated from your par-
 ents,
 whenever you have a minute call your parents.
 Say: Totty, I love you; Mommy, I love you
 Even if it is so strange for them to hear this
 and even if your parents passed on to the next
 world
 still, tell them: I love you, and how much you have

loved them,
 and when you go home tonight
 and you see your little boys and girls sleeping in
 their beds
 kiss them, and in the morning
 tell them: My son, or my daughter, how much I
 love you
 because I believe fully that
 the closer we get to our parents and children
 we invoke the compassion of our Father in
 Heaven,
 K'rachem Av Al Banim,
 because if we use His love towards us
 as a comparison of how a father loves his child
 let's at least show what this means from
 a parent to his child
 because Ribbono Shel Olam,
 "We are Your children, and You are our Father."
 And now on Motzaei Shabbos, when Eliyahu
 Hanavi
 dwells amongst us
 and his job is to
 "Return the hearts of parents to the hearts of their
 children."
 This song my dear father composed as we met for
 the first time:
 "Return the hearts of children to the hearts of
 their parents."
 We learned that before you go on a long trip you
 should recite the portion of Vayishlach.
 The past Shabbos every Jew recited Vayishlach
 Let it already be the massive trip towards the holy
 land
 and let us all return to our source.
 "Return the hearts of parents to the hearts of their
 children"
 "Return the hearts of children to the hearts of
 their parents."

Yasher koach!

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