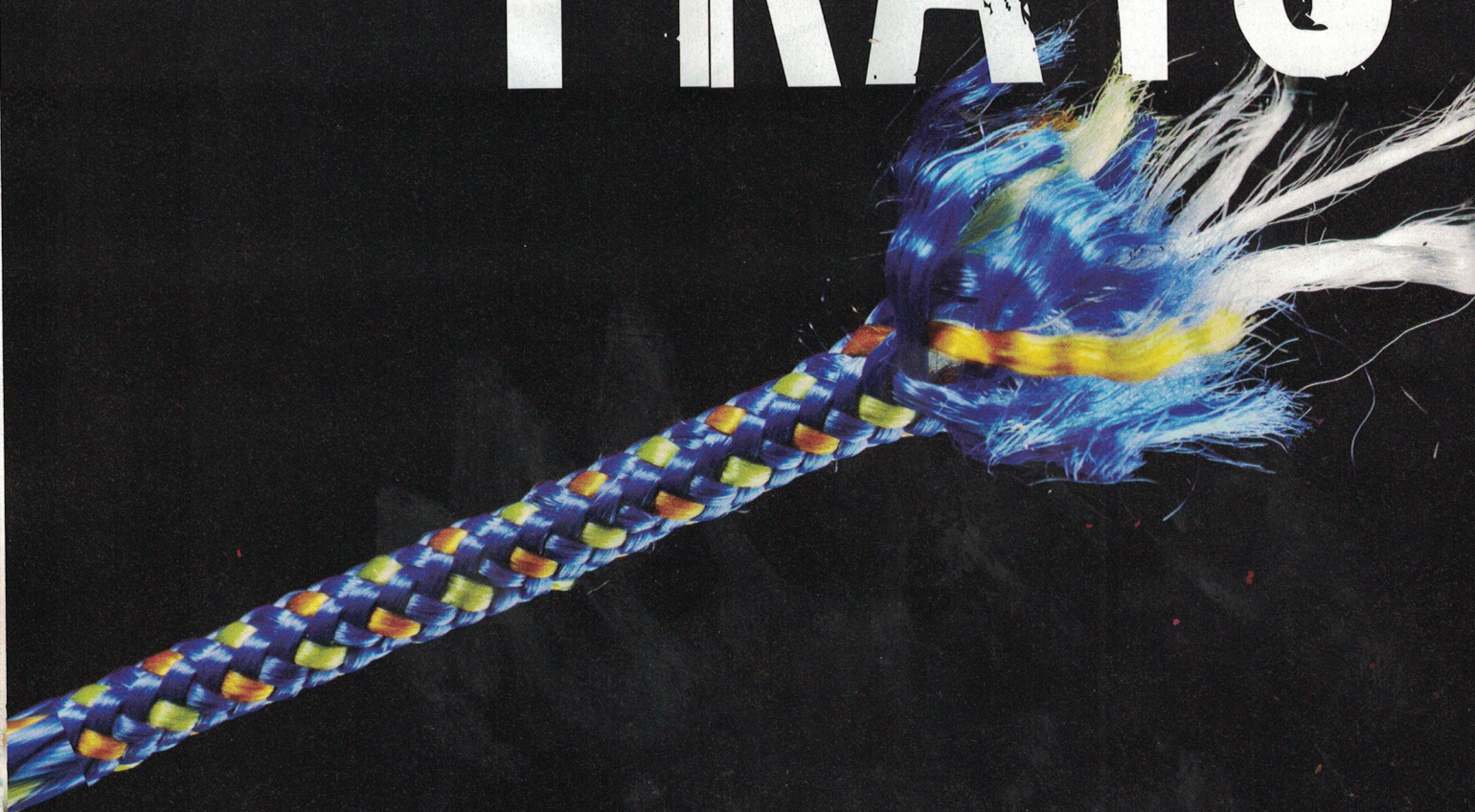


WHEN CONNECTION

FRAYS





YOUR CHILD IS SUDDENLY
ACTING ALOOF
AND PULLING AWAY
PHYSICALLY AND
EMOTIONALLY.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO
STRENGTHEN THE TIES
BETWEEN YOU SO THEY
DON'T SNAP ENTIRELY?

ELISHEVA APPEL

IN GROWING NUMBERS,

children in pain are opting to deal with complex relationship issues by minimizing contact with their parents. Current psychology buzzwords are “boundaries” and “space.” “Unfriending” is considered a healthy coping technique, and popular self-help trends empower millennials to divest themselves of toxic relationships.

In previous generations, when it was less socially acceptable to distance oneself from parents, children were more likely to suffer through volatile relationships than to pull away from their families. Today, when society is more favorably disposed to children who carve out their own space, young people increasingly choose this path as the way to resolve family problems.

Simultaneously, their parents, who grew up with the concept that family is sacrosanct and irreplaceable, tend to cling tenaciously to the bond. Wise parents and children realize that although there are rare cases, ideally determined by a serious discussion with qualified professionals and *daas Torah*, where a complete rupture is warranted, the value of a parent-child relationship, even when limited or strained, can hardly be overstated.

While most communication problems have complicated roots involving both parties, the onus of reconciliation is on the parents, says Mrs. Basie (Tress) Rosenblatt LCSW, a social worker in private practice in Brooklyn and Lakewood, as well as a consultant for MASK. With perspective acquired through their additional life experience, parents usually have a greater appreciation for, and dedication to, the centrality of family, which can help them make painful choices for

the good of the relationship. Of course, a child who understands the priceless value of family can also be the one to lean in and take initiative for repairing a relationship.

In one case Mrs. Rosenblatt was acquainted with, a mother joined with her adult daughter in a business partnership. When the daughter began to make unreasonable demands with regard to the partnership, the mother decided to withdraw her claims in order not to rupture the mother-daughter relationship. Mrs. Rosenblatt describes the mother's thought process: "My daughter is never nice, but at least she comes over. No business in the world is worth having an estranged daughter. Nothing is worth it."

This sort of *vatranus*, says Mrs. Rosenblatt, putting peace ahead of all considerations of fairness or mutual obligation, is key to maintaining relationships with challenging children who might otherwise cut off contact with their parent.

While parents may need to be the one to make disproportional efforts to salvage a relationship, deep down, children do want to remain part of their families. Parents can take comfort in the fact that even children who minimize contact aren't truly at piece with their decision and will only truly be whole once they've reconciled with the ones who love them most.

DANGER AHEAD

With growing numbers of estrangements in the world at large and in our own community as well, parents whose relationships with their children are faltering are understandably worried about becoming a statistic.

The good news is that estrangements are rarely sudden and shocking. "It's a gradual process," says Dr. Sue Cornbluth. With a PhD in clinical psychology, Dr. Sue, as she likes to be called, is certified

in Breakthrough Parenting, a modality used to reunite alienated parents and children. Through Broken Ties, a support group for parents of alienated children, she became familiar with the plight of parents in our community who are struggling to maintain relationships with children who are pulling away.

Well-meaning therapists or *askanim* who aren't specifically trained in the area of parent-child relationships, alienations, and estrangements, sometimes try to placate distraught clients with pat reassurances: "Give it time, they'll come around," they might tell worried parents, but Dr. Sue warns against grabbing onto these glib assurances, tempting as it may be. In her years of experience, she's never seen a deteriorating parent-child relationship magically heal itself without hard work on the part of both parties, she says.

The longer an emotional drift or estrangement is allowed to continue, the harder it will be to undo, concurs Mrs. Rosenblatt, who advises parents to work to reverse the problem as soon as they can — a charge easier said than done.

According to Dr. Sue, an estrangement that leads to alienation is often preceded by one or more warning signs. For example, the frequency and duration of communication begins to lessen noticeably. Typically, there will be an uptick in bickering, and parents often begin to hear a mantra of, "You're not listening to me. Don't you hear what I'm saying?"

For Libby, a clue that she only recognized in hindsight was her children's increasing use of psychological jargon. While her children were in therapy to deal with their feelings surrounding a sibling's complex mental health case, their language and ways of thinking about their family's dynamics became increasingly pathologized, which she now realizes should have warranted more attention.



“No one wants to amputate
A PART OF THEMSELVES.

Even if they try to
RUN AWAY, THEY WON'T BE
at peace”

However, even when the signs are there, no parent wants to be the meddling adult who makes things worse instead of better. If a parent does notice signs of a deteriorating relationship, caution is warranted; reach out for professional guidance as soon as possible.

HAVING THE TALK

Sunshine is the best disinfectant — bringing areas of concern to the fore and communicating openly about them is the best way to resolve them. Whether or not a parent is working with a therapist, when a relationship begins to sour, it's often best to confront the relationship issue head-on.

“Early on is the time to sit down and talk with children. Say, ‘I want to hear. I'm listening,’ and really be open to talking about how they feel,” says Dr. Sue. “Most of these incidents occur when children tried to approach the parents a million times and didn't feel heard.”

What should a parent say when addressing the elephant in the room? The key component is validation of the child's feelings and experiences, even when they may not match your truth or feelings. While every family member may have experienced the same occurrence, every individual processes emotions differently, and it's critical that parents not invalidate their child's feelings.

As tempting as it is for parents to defend their course of action, it's a mistake, warns Dr. Sue. Defensiveness feels like a denial of their pain.

“I believe that every parent going through this needs to sit down and self-evaluate and look under the surface,” says Dr. Sue. “There are issues that really did happen; it wasn't always a ‘perfect’ family connection. Don't fool yourself; it won't help you. In most cases, both parties share at least some of the responsibility for the falling-out. In order to heal, both parties have to recognize that.

“But the parents are always the ones who have to do more of the work to reconnect. The children don't recognize what they stand to lose.”

Chana Leah is a parent who started out on the wrong track but was a quick learner. When her newly married daughter seemed reluctant to come for Shabbos, called less frequently, and shared fewer details, Chana Leah couldn't understand why her overtures were being rebuffed; she'd been nothing but generous and welcoming.

As the relationship continued to cool, she reached out to a therapist, and together they reviewed the trail of texts Chana Leah had exchanged with her daughter. To her surprise, the therapist demonstrated how Chana Leah had overstepped critical *shanah rishonah* boundaries. Opening herself to the constructive criticism, Chana Leah did a complete 180,

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WHEN NOTHING HELPS

You've followed all the best advice from therapist and rabbanim, but to no avail. How do you move forward when there's a gaping hole in your heart?

"First I had to be convinced that I really was expected to heal and enjoy life," says Devorah, whose daughter became alienated by a mentally ill spouse. "Could I laugh if my child was captive?"

Mothers who have experienced alienation share what helps them cope:

- Get peer support. Support groups like Broken Ties and P.A.S.S. (Parental Alienation Support & Strength) are lifelines to parents who feel, at best, isolated in their pain, and at worst, judged and condemned by acquaintances.
- Give yourself time to cry, but with a limit," advises Chana Leah. In a similar vein, Devorah channeled her grieving into times of tefillah. "*Zokeif kefumim* becomes a *bakashah*, *mechayeh meisim* takes on new meaning, as do *matir asurim*, *refoeinu*, *m'kabeitz nidchei Yisrael* — but so does *modim*."
- Spiritual *hishtadlus* is a powerful lifeline. "We missed our grandchild's bar mitzvah, but we gave him a gift," says Devorah. "A *kabbalah* for the full month of the milestone, as a *zechus* for the child, is the most beautiful gift."
- Have stock lines prepared to respond to busybodies or genuinely concerned friends. When people asked if her daughter was okay, Devorah found it simplest to say, "No, but I'd rather not discuss it right now." She says she has yet to receive a follow-up phone call. Others choose to be more evasive, but plan your answers so you're not left fumbling on the spot.
- Keep up ties with other family members. "Paradoxically, even though I knew the pain of one child moving away from me, I had to work hard on not moving away from my remaining family. By selfishly blanketing myself in my own loss and grief, I'm in effect moving away from them — and losing them as well," says Devorah. Keep the solid ties strong.
- Libby's greatest therapy is helping others through their pain. By creating a support group for grieving mothers, she helps others navigate the painful reality without feeling as alone as she did when her ordeal began.

acknowledging the part she'd played in making her young couple uncomfortable in her home. "My daughter was telling me in her own way that she needs space for herself and her new husband, and I didn't hear it. All I wanted was for my needs to be met. I was being self-centered."

For a parent to wholeheartedly take responsibility for an unhealthy dynamic like Chana Leah did is uncommon; often, the situation is more complex, and both parties have a part in creating the tension. The most important thing for parents to remember is that validating their children's pain and listening to their interpretation of the past is not an admission of guilt. Children's pain doesn't mean they weren't good parents or didn't do the best they could.


Saying, "I gave them so much!" or "Don't they realize I did it all for them?" may be true, but is basically irrelevant; if the child experienced distress, no amount of the parent's goodwill can wipe that away.

"The parent needs to show and feel compassion," says Mrs. Rosenblatt. "She can apologize for not having understood her child." To determine whether there was any hurt for which she should apologize, Mrs. Rosenblatt suggests consulting with an objective third party.

And yet, some parents are understandably hesitant to validate what may sound like very frivolous complaints their children have against them. They're reluctant to apologize for things that never happened, or that were perfectly sound parenting decisions.

There are different schools of thought among experts as to whether it is helpful for parents to apologize to aggrieved children, says Mrs. Rosenblatt. "Parents have to take themselves out of their comfort zones to apologize," she says. "Some people advocate writing apology letters or doing some outrageous things. I've seen it work, but I've also seen it be an abysmal failure."

While validating a child's hurt always has a salutary effect on the relationship, apologies are a deeply personal decision that should, Mrs. Rosenblatt suggests, be made by each individual in consultation with a therapist or rav who understands the nuances of her case.



GETTING HELP

When choosing a therapist, doing the proper homework to investigate their qualifications is critical, says Mrs. Rosenblatt. Many common therapy modalities are useless when it comes to building bridges with children who feel wronged, and not many therapists are trained to coach parents through this volatile issue.

Find out if the therapist has qualifications or training related to repairing rifts in the parent-child relationship. Also of critical importance is reviewing the therapist's track record for evidence of any biases in either direction — does he advocate cutting off ties with challenging relationships, or does he see family as inviolate and irreplaceable? "You're not looking for someone who will side with you," says Mrs. Rosenblatt, "but someone who understands how to improve the relationship."

A therapist who validates a client's pain without actually encouraging her to take charge and do something about it will only worsen the problem. Instead, parents and children should both seek out someone dedicated not just to the general cause of emotional wellbeing, but to the specific cause of rebuilding relationships.

Libby learned the hard way that not all therapists are created equal. Some, who counseled her children to cut off ties, contributed to the devastation of her family. Others focused unproductively on her own shortcomings, twisting the knife of guilt instead of helping her find a path forward by repairing her mistakes. The best, like her current therapist, helped her in practical ways, coaching her on wording delicate texts or emails, and giving her strength to keep reaching out despite being rebuffed.

While there's no realistic way to stop an adult child from seeking help from a therapist or teacher who seems to be encouraging the rift, Dr. Sue does suggest requesting that no decisions be made before the parent has had a chance to be heard.

IT'S ALL ABOUT MINDSET

When reaching out to a child who has been withdrawing, it's critical that the parent makes clear they are doing it from a place of unconditional love, and not to fill their own emptiness. A "Thinking of you," "Have a beautiful Shabbos" text expresses non-threatening goodwill, not ties to any expectations. As hurtful as it may seem to a mother who has devoted years of her life to raising this child to be told not to expect anything, it's the sacrifice she needs to make if she wants to preserve the relationship.

It can be helpful to separate the "shoulds" from the facts on the ground. The child's mitzvah of *kibbud av v'eim* is between her and Hashem and is independent of the state of her relationship with her parents; it's her own principle that she is choosing to uphold, not based on whether her parents are currently acting in ways that deserve her respect.

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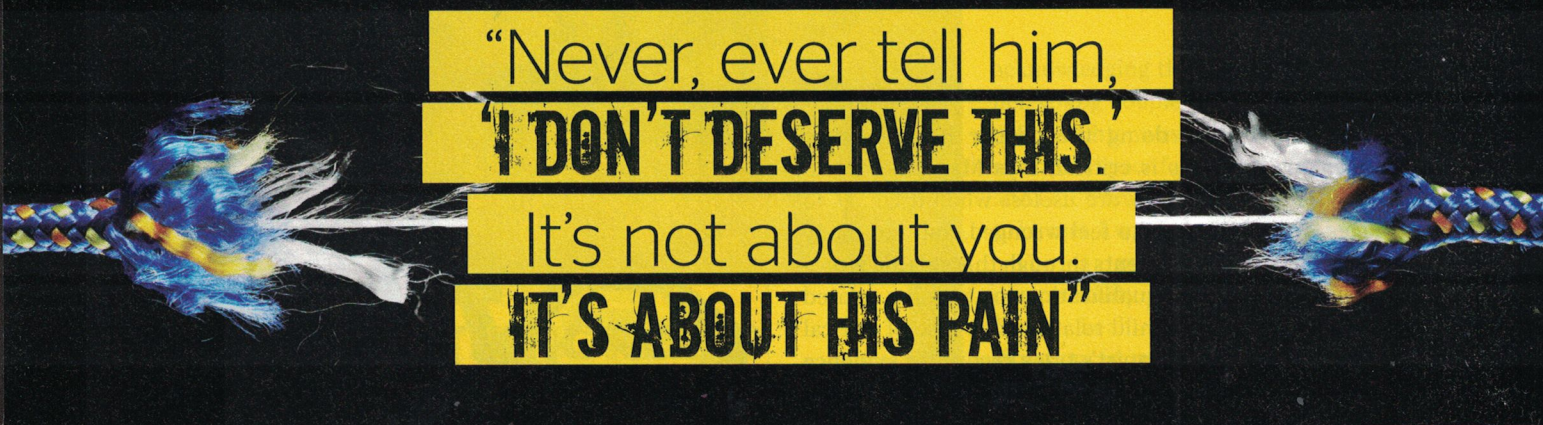
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“Never, ever tell him,
‘I DON’T DESERVE THIS.’
It’s not about you.
IT’S ABOUT HIS PAIN.”

Similarly, a parent who is struggling with the idea that her children owe her respect, and that she ought not be pursuing them, can remind herself that the *kibbud horim* is between her child and G-d; the parent’s role is to bridge the widening chasm so that the family unit can remain intact.

Chana Leah emphasizes the importance of putting the needs of the child and the relationship before any personal considerations. If she’s learned one thing, it’s that it’s not about her — it’s about the child. When her daughter maintained a normal relationship with her husband while minimizing the relationship with her mother, Chana Leah was initially angry that her husband was continuing the relationship; now, she’s realized that any connection is better for her daughter than none, and it was her ego that had prevented her from seeing that.

Critically important, says Chana Leah, is to be sensitive to your child’s pain, and never add yours to his or place blame. Nobody happy and healthy chooses to divorce his family, she notes. “Anyone who acts this way is in pain,” she says. “Never, ever tell him, ‘I don’t deserve this.’ It’s not about you. It’s about his pain.” Adding guilt to the list of difficult emotions a struggling child is trying to process is a surefire way of driving him further away.

ON THEIR TERMS

Many children who are minimizing contact with their families aren’t exactly eager to sit down for a heart-to-heart with their parents. Chana Leah relates that her daughter took to calling each week five minutes before candle-lighting, so despite there not being time to talk, no one could technically fault her for not calling. Still, despite the broad hint she was sending, Chana Leah kept her in the loop by e-mailing mazel tovs, family photos, and general news, so she could read it — or not read it — on her own terms, without feeling pressured by real-time contact.

This non-threatening approach yielded dividends when her daughter called up the family and asked to get together Chanukah time. All the children enjoyed an afternoon out with their sister, laughing and reliving the good times. Although her daughter reverted to minimal contact after that event, Chana Leah is grateful that they were able to remind her and themselves that they are a normal, happy family, and that they can have a great time together without getting stuck on their issues.

When a child requests space, it’s crucial that parents respect their children’s boundaries, even if they may not fully understand them. Demands regarding frequency or duration of calls or visits or sharing information that a child might

prefer to keep confidential undermines an already fragile relationship.

While it may be painful for a parent to hear her child setting rules about their contact, accepting those restrictions is the stepping stone to building a more solid relationship down the line.

THE END?

Virtually every woman used the same metaphor: Resuscitating a troubled relationship is a roller coaster. There will be ups and downs, and the downs are likely to be more numerous and protracted than the ups.

But while many parents are still awaiting their happily ever after, there’s reason to hope, because forgiveness and reconciliation are familiar concepts to every Jew, says Mrs. Rosenblatt. Just as we beseech Hashem daily to pardon all manner of offenses, some of which we never even realized we committed, we can humble ourselves and approach all our relationships with a mindset of sincere contrition, desire for closeness, and willingness to learn.

With time, patience, and humility, relationships can and do heal. By perfecting their ability to repair imperfect communication and express unconditional love, parents can prepare themselves to receive their estranged children with open arms. ❁