

# The Couch

MODERATOR: ELCHANAN SCHWARZ LMHC

Dear Therapist,

My husband has a mental health issue, which is b"H under control, with the help of therapy and a lot of support. With incredible siyata dishmaya, we were able to repair the damage it caused to our relationship. However, because of his issues, which started in his parents' house at a young age, I have no relationship with my husband's parents. They are aware of the issue and have been incredibly unsupportive. In fact, they have been quite cruel to me about it. They have spoken against me to my husband and have undermined some of the things we have put in place to help me and my husband. They have lied to me and refused to help pay for the therapy for the issue which began in their own home, even though they are people who can clearly afford to help. I do not talk to them at all, but I have not stopped my husband or children from having a relationship with them (even though I wish they wouldn't). Please do not encourage me to make shalom with them. My therapy has taught me to stay away from toxic and abusive people and to take care of myself. My question is, how do I explain to my children, the oldest of whom is 10, why I do not speak to my in-laws and stay away while they are visiting? What would be an age-appropriate way to explain this to them, so that I do not appear to have bad middos and so that they don't copy this with their in-laws one day (I daven that they should have healthy spouses and nice, supportive in laws). I would really appreciate your guidance.

Thank you!

*Mondechai Weinberger,*  
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AUTHOR OF "MASTERING RELATIONSHIPS" AND "ALIVE", AND RADIO HOST. TO HEAR RECORDINGS OF PREVIOUS RADIO PROGRAMS CALL 718-298-2011.

Thank you for bringing up an issue that many people are dealing with. As you have discovered, people may come into marriage burdened with emotional issues that have nothing to do with their spouse, but now that the spouses are sharing a life, the issues become part of that life. You surely wish that your in-laws had helped their son resolve his challenges before

sending him down the aisle to the *chuppah*, but instead, it's been your years of hard work and tears, it's been your dealing with the potential stigma of a mental health diagnosis in the family, it's been your expenditure of time, money and emotion that have been invested in bringing your husband to a more balanced state. It's also possible that your husband refused to go to therapy because of his concern of how his parents will react, which further fuels the resentment that you have toward them.

Naturally, you would expect your in-laws to be grateful and supportive, and instead they insult you and undermine the gains your husband has made. The feelings and expectations you had of them have been disappointed, which, in your words, has turned the relationship toxic. And of course, every person who wants to re-

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main healthy steers clear of that which is toxic.

To shed a bit more light on this type of situation, I'd like to present the broad outlines of a situation I have recently dealt with in therapy. The "toxic" element was a grandmother who survived the horrors of Auschwitz physically but suffered life-long trauma and severe anxiety because of her experiences. While she was a hero and was *zoche* to raise a beautiful generation and see grandchildren and great-grandchildren, at the same time she really suffered from severe PTSD and anxiety. It affected her everyday life. In the early 1950s, she was given one of the initial forms of drug treatment for anxiety, which had severe side-effects. At that time, trauma therapy had not been developed to its present state. The therapy she did receive came from a non-Jewish therapist who promoted ideas that contradicted everything she believed in. Without therapy or medication, the only other choice was to pretend everything was fine to the outside world and to justify her behaviors. When she did not appear at family *simchas* because she was afraid of Nazis entering the hall and harming the participants, everyone knew to say she wasn't feeling well. When she panicked as a passenger in the car that something will happen to everyone, her children explained that "Bubbi is afraid of the wild drivers on the road." When she lost her temper with her grandchildren because she was never able to handle any noise, their parents would explain that "Bubbi is old."

If anyone mentioned therapy to Bubbi, once the modern, *frum*-friendly, and effective modalities were available, she launched into a tirade. The entire family culture was formed around pretending that Bubbi's extreme case of anxiety was a justifiable way of behaving. Today, many of her grandchildren suffer from anxiety, but the family creed continues; therapy takes a Jew off the *derech* and medication scrambles the mind. We know this is not true, but that's how generational narratives live on. One of the benefits of this column is to open people's eyes to these issues and educate them as to options.

It's very possible that your in-laws have such a narrative, especially if they are children of Holocaust survivors. If that is the case, then the only way they can hold their head up is to believe and promote the idea – true or not – that all their children are healthy and normal. They therefore attack the idea of therapy and attack anyone who suggests it.

This is one common scenario, and while it may not match the facts of your specific situation, it demonstrates that where we perceive cruelty and selfishness, something altogether different might be happening. In that light, I'd like to address your statement that "My therapy has taught me to stay away from toxic and abusive people." This statement has an air of finality about it, as if once the label "toxic" has been applied to someone, you no longer have to feel obligated to deal with that person.

I don't believe that any responsible therapist would take that stance as a permanent solution, especially regarding parents or children. When a relationship is draining to someone's mental health and harmful to their marriage and family, I and most therapists I know consult with a *rov* to decide whether and to what degree the client should minimize the relationship to allow time for healing.

The goal is to build up tolerance to enable the client to deal with the difficult person. In your case, your husband and his siblings and in-law siblings seem to have this tolerance, but you are more sensitive to the negativity and are therefore disabled by interactions with them. The solution is not to blindly adhere to a creed of "stay away from toxic people" but to work on learning to interact with them within boundaries that work for you and may expand over time. For instance, if you can't be with them for a whole Shabbos, perhaps you can be there for one *seudah* or *melava malka*. If they live too far to walk, visit for an hour on a Sunday.

In addition, if you consider where their negativity comes from as we discussed above, the cognitive shift may help to take the bite out of their hurtful words and behaviors. They are locked into their thinking, but the fact is that we all are, unless we take it upon ourselves to challenge those views.

The conclusion of all the above is that your children do not have to absorb a negative message about your in-laws or about proper behavior toward parents and in-laws. If you are doing your best to include them in your life in a way that's doable for you, and you make an effort to understand where their hostility is coming from, your message to your children will reflect the fact that you honor your in-laws and care about them. If they question limits you put on the relationship, and you are truly putting them in place only out of a desire to create a workable relationship, this spirit will come through. You can tell your children honestly, "Bubbi and Zeidy don't mean to do it but sometimes they say things that make me feel nervous. They're good people and they love us and they love you, but I'm just a little sensitive. You go visit and have a wonderful time."

Of course, if your dealings with your in-laws come from the sense that they're cruel, oppressive people, that is what your children will perceive. In the end, if your in-laws are loving to your children, your children will assume that it is you, not them, who is creating a rupture in the family. Your best results, long-term, will come from extending to your in-laws the honor and respect parents deserve including accepting their limitations; finding workable boundaries should be a part of that effort.

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You are doing a wonderful service for many readers by sharing your story. You provide hope that people can change and that even painful wounds in relationshipscan be repaired. Your question about your in-laws is indeed painfully difficult. It sounds like you still have pain from their behavior which threatened to undermine you personally as well as undermine your marital progress.

Your husband seems able to carry on some level of relationship with his parents and he wants your children involved too. Wisely, you do not interfere with his decision even though it puts you in a tough place.

I wonder if this is something that can be discussed in marital therapy. If both you and your husband are able to hear each other's perspective, you might be able to come up with an idea that feels better than this current situation. If your husband understands your hurt and possibly your fear of them causing further damage, how might he reassure you? Are there boundaries put into place that give you the security that your marriage is his priority? What might it be like to work through the pain they caused you and then creating your own emotional boundary? There are ways to maintain superficial politeness without being close so that it does not have to be obvious that you exit every time they enter.

If this suggestion of any type of contact just is not something you are ready to consider on any level, exploring what and how to inform your children can also be addressed in therapy. I would also suggest consulting a *rov* who understands the nature of your husband's struggles as well, to help with these family dynamics.

You are in a hard place. Really, you want a different reality where your husband also chooses to stop contact. Yet, he did not. And now, your only choice is how you choose to work on accepting this disparity and its impact on your family.

I wonder if you have worked through the emotional pain your in-laws caused you in individual therapy. It is almost impossible to formulate healthy decisions from a place of so much hurt and betrayal. Many people find that once they do this work, their window of tolerance expands. They are able to find some meaning and even grow from their experience. And from that place, the intensity

of their pain diminishes. Then, the decisions reflect that inner calm. The most important priority for your children is two healthy parents who live in shalom together.

I wish you continued *hatzlocha* and much healing.

*Ronen Hizami, MD*

BOARD CERTIFIED CHILD,  
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Thank you for raising this important question.

Families are extremely complex organisms that balance various personality types within the context of a structured organism. It can be quite hard to understand why certain relationship patterns develop, or pathologies come to pass. In the *shidduch* process families all put their best foot forward. It is only after the dust settles that one can appreciate the real patterns one has married into.

Most individuals don't set about to harm their children or spouses intentionally. We all enter our marriages with our trailer full of issues, difficulties, traumas and more. When an individual marries into a family system, that person needs to be accommodated into that system to a certain extent. This varies based on which *kehilla* they are from and how tightly knit the family is. This process can be smooth or difficult due to numerous issues.

The tone of your question is filled with anger and pain. It is impossible for me to know whether the statements you make are true or warranted. Even if you



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# Relief Corner

## IN-LAWS

There is no shortage of in-law jokes, and for those who have wonderful relationships with their in-laws none of these jokes bear any resemblance to reality. However, there are many people who do not have the best relationship with their in-laws. As is clear from the *Mishnah* in *Maseches Yevamos* (15:4), this is not a new phenomenon. The Mishna there relates that if a man disappears and we do not know if he is alive, his mother is not believed to testify that he passed away since she might be intentionally lying in order to sabotage her daughter-in-law. Why is it so hard to be a friendly in-law? Why can't we all just get along?

Of course, we have the popular adage that the role of parents of married children is to open your wallet and close your mouth. However, closing your mouth will not guarantee that you are properly executing your responsibilities as an in-law, since this does not preclude passive-aggressive behavior that can be just as damaging as overtly aggressive behavior.

Before we begin, a note to the readership. If you are an in-law reading this article and you have a strained relationship with your child-in-law, you might disagree with the information in this article. That might be due to the fact that our behaviors are controlled by subconscious forces that we often have a hard time recognizing, especially when we are dealing with our own behaviors.

### Protecting the Child from Danger

One subconscious force that can be at play is the innate drive to be a protective parent. Parents, especially mothers, are hardwired to protect their child from any and all of the dangers that are out there. As with all instincts, its purpose serves a vital role, but its subconscious nature allows it to become activated in situations that resemble a danger but are not really a danger at all.

Therefore, if a child marries someone who the par-

ents do not wholeheartedly approve of, their natural instinct to protect their child from all perceived harm will immediately label their child-in-law as a predator who is trying to destroy their child. This will lead to all kinds of negative behaviors from the in-laws that will range from passive aggressive to downright aggressive.

### Attacking the Baby Snatcher

Another cause for negative behavior from an in-law is the perceived loss of their child. When their child was single and living at home, the child spent a lot of time with his or her parents and was a part of their life on a daily basis. Now that their child is married, there is a dramatic decrease in the attention that the child will give to his or her parents. This is not done with malicious intent, rather the practicalities of not living in the same house and sharing a life with a new spouse will by definition translate into a drastic change in the focus of the child's attention.

Sometimes, a parent will subconsciously view this as if someone stole their child. In essence, once again, the child-in-law is the sinister predator, and this time it is committing the crime of baby snatching. This subconscious perspective may lead to friction between parents and their child's spouse. Therefore, even if the parents realize that their child's spouse is a wonderful person and is a fantastic match for their child, it may still be difficult to avoid the feeling of having something robbed from them.

Due to the subconscious nature of one's negative feelings towards their child-in-law, the expression of these feelings may be very subtle. Thus, the child-in-law may feel hurt, and the parent-in-law might not know why. This cycle of negativity may become entrenched and become very hard to break out of. Here are some of the subtle ways that a parent-in-law might cause friction

with their child-in-law.

**No Boundaries:** A parent who refuses to recognize that their child is now in a committed relationship with his or her spouse and that their relationship comes first will have a very difficult time respecting their boundaries and their right to privacy. They might ask nosy questions, pop in unannounced at the most inconvenient times, provide advice in an intrusive manner, etc. Such behavior is not just annoying, it is also sending a message that you do not recognize their right to exist as an autonomous entity.

**Oversharing:** Sometimes a parent in-law will overshare with their child-in-law. This includes both gossip about other members of the family and private information that should not be shared. This might sound somewhat "gracious" as the parent-in-law feels so close to the child-in-law that the parent is willing to share secrets. However, in reality this is interfering with the child-in-law's ability to be happy in their new family by pulling them into situations that they are better off not being part of.

**Overly Sensitive:** In many areas of our lives, if we allow things to bother us, we end up in a bad mood, which can escalate into interpersonal issues. With a child-in-law, this is especially true. A child-in-law is often in his or her early twenties and might not be mature enough to always be politically correct with his or her in-laws. If the parent-in-law is sensitive and reacts negatively (either overtly or covertly), there is a high risk of escalation into a full-blown conflict.

A wise man once said, "Don't be right. Be smart!" With your child-in-law, this is especially true. If you focus on what is the smart and pragmatic thing to do and not who is right and who is wrong, you and your entire family will benefit.

## RELIEF

Relief resources is a non-profit organization whose mission is to provide access to the best mental health resources available. This is accomplished through Relief's highly-acclaimed referral service, where a trained referral specialist will help you navigate the process of finding the best resources for your particular need. For assistance, call 718.431.9501

are correct, blaming the parents of adult children for the pathology that developed in their homes is not usually productive or helpful. How do you expect them to react? Unless they have been in treatment, an unhealthy system will remain unhealthy. Blaming them overtly or covertly only serves to stress the system more. This then creates more layers of unhealthy relationships, which is exactly what you describe in your question.

Demanding that your in-laws pay for treatment seems out of place here. Their financial status has nothing to do with anything. Your husband is an adult and is responsible for himself. If you are struggling financially as a family and can't afford treatment on your own, asking your in-laws to help is reasonable, regardless of their culpability. It can be for oral surgery, psychotherapy, or any type of treatment. Demanding that they pay for treatment because they are somehow culpable will just make them defensive and more resistant. Of course, they will lash out and denigrate you to your husband.

Your job as a spouse and parent is to be mindful of the dangers this family poses to you, and your family. It is also your duty to try to accommodate into that family in a healthy way. It is beyond the scope of this forum to address specific

interventions in such a complex system. This should be addressed by a licensed therapist and *rov* who can guide you and your family.

here are two classic approaches to move a donkey- the whip or the carrot. While there are some people who only respond to the whip, in my experience most respond better to the carrot. It may be helpful to reconsider your entire approach to dealing with your in-laws, in a way that will be more instructive for your children and healthier for all involved.

*Hatzlacha!*

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Relationships with in-laws can be challenging. Even in the best of times, adding an entirely new set of people,

relationships, perspectives, and ways of thinking into a family dynamic can be taxing. When there are significant differences in personality and ways of dealing with important issues, problematic situations often arise.

Despite your children's young ages, as you intimated, they have likely picked up on some of the animosity between your in-laws and you. Depending on their age, each child may have some conscious thoughts or concerns about the situation. They may not be able (or willing) to discuss these with you; in fact, they may not be entirely conscious of their concerns.

As you probably know from your own experience, when a concern or fear is unclear, it often takes on a life of its own, causing levels of anxiety and other emotions far beyond the level that one would expect. This is due to the unconscious (emotional, insecure, triggered) child mind making us feel that the situation is far more problematic than it is. The reason that we do this as adults is that, when triggered, our adult mind is co-opted by our childhood-based emotions—those based on the magical thought that is inherent in the thought processes of children.

I cannot tell you exactly what to say

to each of your children, or whether anything should be said at all. This would be dependent on the ages and levels of maturity, among other factors. I think, however, that it is important for your kids' thoughts and feelings about your relationship with your in-laws to be rooted in fact. This way, their imaginations are less likely to run wild—or for them to simply make assumptions that are untrue (like, "It is okay to ignore your parents" or "My mother dislikes people for no reason" or "My grandparents are bad people).

Hopefully, your husband and you are on the same page in terms of how to approach these types of discussions with each child. It is important that they receive a unified message so that they are not left confused. Confusion could lead to further assumptions, which are often more problematic than the reality. Your husband and you should have a conversation about what to discuss with each child, focusing on each child's personality, maturity, and any other personal factors. In this way, you can come up with a unified approach that will not be contradicted, either overtly or otherwise, by one another.