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ASH RABBI

Dear Rabbi Taub:

You often stress in your answers that you are not a therapist, yet of all similar columns, I find yours the most honest and understanding. With all the training in the world, many therapists cannot truly fathom what an abused person is going through. Therefore, many therapists, who are so worried about doing something contrary to the Torah, end up doing exactly that by encouraging people to remain in dangerous relationships.

I come from a dysfunctional and physically violent home. I left there a long time ago, and I am currently in therapy after having been exploited by every controlling person I come across. I have learned that when I feel vulnerable, unhealthy people take advantage of it and bully me to do what they want. Since I became aware of it, an emotionally unhealthy family member whom I used to be fearful of now senses my new strength and confidence, and I sense that she has become scared of me! This person abused me when I was a very young child. When I was older and first fled home, she knew what was going on and abused me further, causing me to feel terrible about myself. Over the years she has continued to take advantage of me, harassing me terribly and embarrassing me in public if I do not do the favors she asks of me.

Now that I am strong and realize I was not to blame for what she did, I am able to speak about it (to people whom I fully trust). She must realize that she does not have me in her grip anymore, and that I will tell people if she further abuses me, because she is desperately trying to take back control. She has been fabricating stories about me. A few people, including other family members, have called me and said, "She is really sad, because you did such-and-such."

I am not sure where to go from here. I don't feel the need to prove my innocence, but she is getting people riled up against me, and I do not want my name tarnished. Should I just ignore what is going on? I am not interested in getting embroiled in her messes. I cannot speak to her straight out, because she always lies and blames everyone else for her mistakes. She can insist that white is black, and you can't get anywhere with her. She is by nature a very unhappy person, even though she has what many people wish for. She generally has a very interesting perception of events around her. In the past she has complained to me about other people not doing what she wants of them. Although to me her demands sound ludicrous and her behavior towards them is antisocial, I never bother explaining it to her, because "She Is Always Right." I just listen and say nothing, because otherwise she will just get annoyed.

Our paths tend to cross a lot, as we know the same people and live near each other, besides being family. This makes it difficult to just not have contact with her.

Trying to Break Free

A Family Member Is Trying to Ruin My Name

Dear *Trying*: Thank you for your kind words about the column. Regarding your comment about therapists, I agree that training alone is not enough to make someone empathetic to those who have been through serious challenges in life. However, I feel it is important to point out that there are many truly compassionate and sensitive therapists.

Indeed, I assume you have found one, since you say that you are now in therapy. Before I address the issue about which you have asked my perspective, I want to first comment on what you told me about your background. Although I was pained to hear about what you endured at home while growing up, I was relieved to hear that not only have you removed yourself from that situation but that you have

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begun to heal in ways that are apparently even recognizable to others. You note that when you first left home (and I do not know for how long after) you were still a target for abuse by others. But there has since been much positive change in that area as well. That's progress, which brings me to the issue that you write about.

You have so to speak "graduated" to a new kind of challenge. People used to take advantage of your vulnerability (as you say, "I have learned that when I feel vulnerable, unhealthy people take advantage of it..."). But now that you have made a conscious effort to project a certain level of self-confidence, you have a new problem (as you say, "Since I became aware of it, an emotionally unhealthy family member... now senses my new strength... [and] is desperately trying to take back control"). Unfortunately, this is actually a good sign. I say that it is unfortunate because it is sad that our relative is behaving this way. But as it strictly concerns you and your growth, it is very positive. Now, you just have to graduate from this problem as well.

It seems you already know what you need to do. Since you are writing to me, however, perhaps you need encouragement. So I will repeat to you the excellent advice that you wrote for yourself. "I am not interested in getting embroiled in her messes. I cannot speak to her straight at, because she always lies... In the past she has complained to me about other people... I just listen and say nothing..." You are basically saying that there is nothing productive about speaking directly to her—not about yourself and not about others. Or as the wisest of all men summed it up quite simply (*Mishlei* 1:4), "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you too become like him." Perhaps more harshly, I might also borrow a

turn of phrase from *chasidus* (see *Tanya* ch. 28), "One who wrestles with a filthy person becomes dirtied as well."

There is nothing for you to do about this person other than to disengage as much as practically possible. I understand that it is impossible for you to have no contact at all with her, but to whatever extent you can minimize your dealings with her, it would be wise to do so.

I understand that you feel conflicted about this, because to say nothing and do nothing (even though you know it is the only healthy response) means allowing her to continue speaking untruths about you. As you say, "I do not want my name tarnished." But in the very next sentence you answer your own problem: "Should I just ignore what is going on?" Yes, you should just ignore what's going on.

Yes, it's unnerving to have no recourse against her talebearing, but consider what you say about her motives, namely that she is only doing this "because she is desperately trying to take back control." Very well. Just as she gave up bullying you when it no longer worked, so too will she eventually give up badmouthing you when she sees how *that* no longer works. This is exactly what I mean when I said earlier that you have come a long way but you still have more room to grow. You have to disengage even more until this relative of yours will see the futility of trying to get any leverage over you. Indeed, this is not only prudent, it is also part of your healing.

Now, I will add one point. You did not ask me for my opinion about this, but you did mention that one of the ways that your relative knows that she no longer has control over you is that you are able to talk about her abuse of you. ("She must realize that she does not have me in her grip

anymore, and that I will tell people if she further abuses me...")

I think it is important that victims of abuse never feel that they have to keep secrets, but there is a difference between a secret and something that is personal. A secret is associated with shame. You have done nothing shameful. You were the one who was abused. There are no secrets here. It is, however, personal. As such, you should discuss it strictly on a need-to-know basis. For instance, you may need to discuss it with the therapist you mentioned. You may also tell people to whom your relative may be a threat. Maybe a good review of the laws of *lashon hara* are in order. Especially now, as we head into the Three Weeks, this certainly couldn't hurt. In short, you do not have to keep secrets. However, a major part of disengaging from this person and eventually becoming completely free of her is to no longer even talk *about* her, or to only speak about her when absolutely necessary. Again, let *halachah* be your guide as to what is necessary. If you are unsure, ask a *rav* who will be able to guide you in speaking out as much as necessary to protect your wellbeing and the wellbeing of others.

At this time of year when we collectively mourn the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash* and pray for its rebuilding, let us have in mind all those who have been hurt, and may those who wronged them no longer have any power over them.

May you continue to heal and grow.

With blessing,

RST

Questions to Rabbi Shai Taub should be sent to ask@amimagazine.org.