

REVISION

When Children Become Strangers

The consequences of severing connections

The feature on parental alienation that appeared in Front Burner II, a supplement magazine included in the Succos issue, elicited considerable feedback from readers, underscoring the prevalence of this painful phenomenon and the importance with which it is viewed within our community.

B'ezras Hashem, we hope to continue exploring this topic in the near future.

One of the articles that was part of that feature was an interview with Mrs. Dina Waxman, LCSW-R. Due a technical glitch, the article was published without author review, and as a result, editorial changes affected the accuracy of the intended meaning.

Below is the correct version of that interview, with important additions by the interviewee.

Mrs. Dina Waxman, LCSW-R

What is the difference between parental estrangement and alienation?

According to the American Psychological Association (APA) — which is the pre-eminent body for defining psychological terminology — the terms estrangement and alienation can be used interchangeably to describe either relational withdrawal or complete cutoff. In informal use, however, “estrangement” is often used to connote distance without a full cutoff, whereas “alienation” is more commonly used to imply a complete cutoff.

What are their causes?

There is, of course, real, verified abuse. I'll go into more detail on that later, but real abuse is very rare. In the vast majority of alienation cases, it's not because of parental abuse at all. In fact, by far, most parents who are alienated are loving, normal parents.

I'd say the main cause is the influence of secular society's thinking. This has seeped into how people think, and, unfortunately, it has also seeped into the *frum* world. This stems from a few things.

First, there is extreme permissive parenting — the belief that a parent's job is to only provide love with no discipline. This is a foreign secular concept. *Lehavdil*, according to the Torah, a parent is *mechuyev* to provide discipline, and neglecting to discipline a child is considered akin to hating the child. Children cannot grow up healthy without direction — they need loving discipline and expectations.

The Torah's approach is with utmost sensitivity; a parent is never allowed to discipline out of anger, *onas devarim* applies to a child just as to any other Jew, and *chanoch lanaar al pi darko* requires tailoring discipline to the child's maturity and personality. A parent must be gentle and careful — yet a parent must still discipline. The Torah is eternal and the only real truth. Science comes and goes and often disproves itself. The Torah's model of parenting is profoundly psychologically sound.

And yet, the extreme permissive model has entered the *frum* community, crippling children emotionally and setting them up for failure. And it is not just with at-risk children that it is being misapplied — I have seen *chinuch* pamphlets openly promoting this approach. One recent example showed two columns: “then” and “now.” “Then” said: “Write 100 times: I will not eat in class.” “Now” said: “*Tzaddikel*, did you have breakfast this morning?” It is truly unbelievable how deeply this wayward idea has seeped into the *frum* mindset.

Permissive ideology is spilling into everything. The protests you see around the world are a product of this thinking — any authority figure is now framed as an abuser. Normal expectations and discipline are labeled “abuse,” and parents become afraid to parent.

Furthermore, extreme independence is fostered in the world at large. The “hero” is often portrayed as someone who leaves their family in a small town to move to the city with other singles. This is touted as healthy: cut off your family, move away, go home once in a while, and put up with your “dysfunctional family” for the holidays.

There's also the “cult of me”: me, myself, and I. The supposedly healthy way of thinking is, “I don't need people in my life; I only want people in my life who will benefit me. If they expect anything from me or make me feel uncomfortable, I have to cut them out.” This is presented as health.

But the opposite is true: Cultures that value interconnection, obligation, and duty above personal comfort are healthier and happier. They understand that people aren't perfect and that knowing how to get along with imperfect people is much healthier than only allowing so-called perfect people into your life, because most people don't fit that “perfect” bill. We have a society where loneliness, isolation, and along with it depression, anxiety, and all kinds of mental illness are on the rise because people are cutting connections. And when the family crumbles, society crumbles. This mindset has unfortunately hit the *frum* community and has crept in everywhere: into our school system, in our reading mate-



rial, in therapists' offices. At the heart of alienation is a therapeutic culture rooted in secular thought.

Are therapists at fault here?

Therapists can be a part of the problem — even though most are well-meaning and genuinely trying to help — because aspects of our secular training can unintentionally contribute to alienation. In the book I am writing on parental alienation, one of the chapters is addressed to therapists, where I speak directly to this issue. One example is Freudian thinking, which assumes that dysfunction in an adult is the parents' fault. Add to this the secular therapeutic culture discussed earlier — such as the idea that emotional health means extreme independence, or that healthy people only stay in relationships with “the healthiest” people — and the risk multiplies.

And this risk can arise around any issue: Someone may walk into therapy for a work conflict and let's say they are overreacting at work; the therapist looks for the root cause, goes back to childhood, and it can end up becoming an alienation case.

Normal childhood needs to be normalized, not pathologized. Yes, dysfunction can develop because of parental mistakes — but mistakes are not abuse. Hashem gave children to human beings who can mess up even with the best intentions. He does not expect us to be *malachim* but to try to do our best, to the best of our ability as fallible human beings. That is His plan — that is how He designed the world. It is the therapist's job to normalize non-abusive, normal, imperfect childhood — and only from that perspective, that all normal parents make mistakes and also do great things — to help the client take ownership and learn healthier ways to cope now that they are adults.

Therapists need to be guided back to confidence in the Torah's way of thinking instead of secular cultural training. The Torah's way is the eternal healthy way and has proven itself again and again.

I am working together with Reb Chaim Bensoussan, who started Vehoishiv — under the guidance of Harav Elya Ber Wachtfogel, *shlita* — an organization dedicated to reconciliation between parents and children. Vehoishiv's goal is to give therapists additional training so they can (1) prevent unintentionally creating alienation in the course of any treatment, (2) receive specialized training in treating cases of actual alienation, (3) establish a network of trained specialists to whom families can confidently turn when alienation is present, and (4) establish a panel of Rabbanim experienced in these cases to provide halachic guidance when it is unclear how a child should conduct themselves with a parent — especially in cases where the question of alienation arises. *Dayanim* I consulted were unequivocal that deciding whether a child may alienate from a parent is strictly a halachic decision — no individual may ever make that call on their own. Furthermore, Rav Wachtfogel, *shlita*, holds that because of the potentially devastating consequences cutoff from a parent causes, such questions fall under *dinei nefashos* — matters with serious, life-altering impact — and therefore cannot be ruled on by a single Rav, but must

be decided by a *beis din* of three Rabbanim who are competent to rule regarding this issue.

At what point is it necessary to cut ties, and where do you draw the line?

Since I work with adults, the following addresses **adult** children.

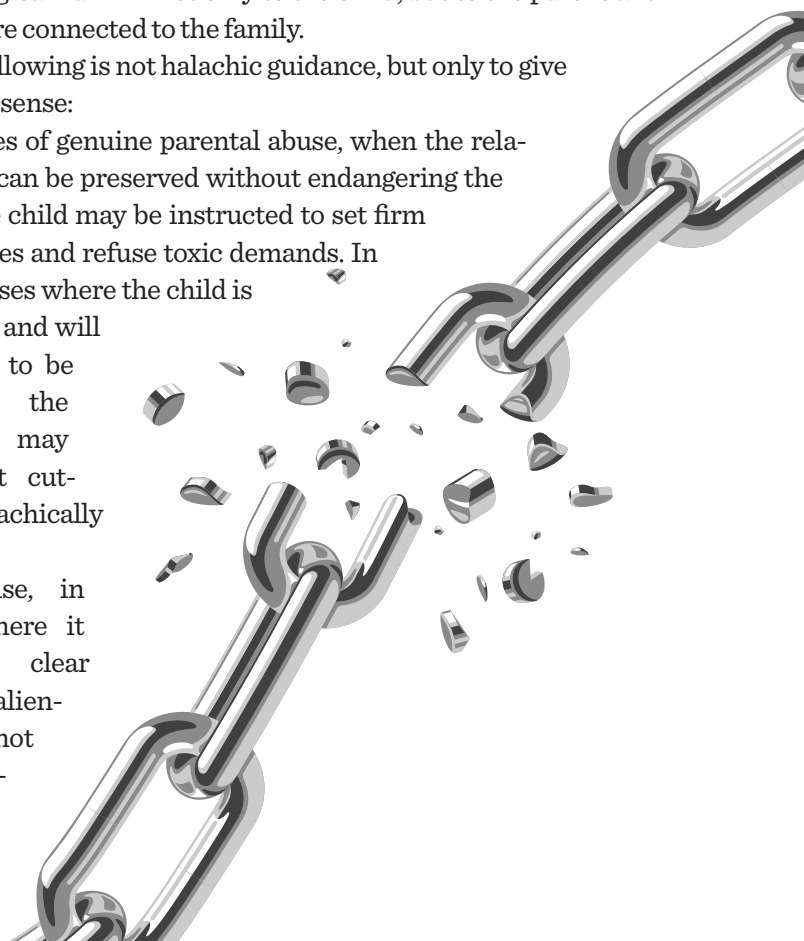
In the overwhelming majority of situations — which are not abusive — we are dealing with *kibbud av v'eim*, a core *mitzvah* incumbent on the child regardless of the parent's merit. And although we keep this *mitzvah* because Hashem commanded it — not because it “feels right” — at the same time Hashem's instructions produce the healthiest psychological outcomes; after all, He created us and knows what works for human beings. And not that we need proof of this, but psychological research shows again and again that cutting off a parent causes lifelong emotional damage to the child who does it. And since in the majority of alienation cases the parents are not abusive, cutting ties is not allowed in such cases and leaves the alienated child with serious psychological wounding — and the parent with suffering that is indescribable.

In cases that are not clear — we do not draw the line — it is a halachic decision that must be decided by a panel of three competent, experienced Rabbanim who take into account the emotional nuances individual to each case. Genuine parental abuse causes severe emotional harm, and a child is not *mechuyev* to suffer. At the same time, when a cutoff is unnecessary or unjustified, it too causes profound psychological harm — not only to the child, but to the parent and all who are connected to the family.

The following is not halachic guidance, but only to give a general sense:

In cases of genuine parental abuse, when the relationship can be preserved without endangering the child, the child may be instructed to set firm boundaries and refuse toxic demands. In severe cases where the child is suffering and will continue to be harmed, the *beis din* may rule that cutoff is halachically required.

Likewise, in cases where it becomes clear that an alienator — not the parent — is the



true abuser who severed the child from an innocent parent, a panel of three can identify this and rule that the alienation is completely *assur* and must stop.

Alienation is never taken lightly — it carries serious, life-altering, and potentially irreversible consequences and is therefore not a decision that any individual — not even a sole Rav who is empowered to render halachic rulings in other areas — may make on their own. Even *l'havdil* secular courts require multiple layers of review by multiple teams when making decisions regarding cutoff and, even in verified abuse cases with minors — who are far more vulnerable than adults — the court still attempts to preserve the parent-child bond when safety can be ensured, recognizing that severing it unnecessarily causes long-term harm.

If even in abuse cases such careful halachic decisions are required, *kal vachomer* how much more destructive — and how *assur* — it is to cut off normally imperfect, loving parents, who make up the vast majority of parents who are alienated.

In your practice, are you dealing with minors or adults?

As mentioned earlier, adults.

With adult children, alienation is usually based on what they refer to as past childhood abuse or current emotional abuse from what they describe as “toxic” parents. These words are thrown around a lot. However, as I've stated several times earlier, most parents who are alienated were not abusive parents.

To give you an idea of the extent to which the word “abuse” is misapplied: in 2020, over 80% of the more than 3 million reports of suspected child abuse filed by

professionals to Child Protective Services (CPS) were found not to be abuse after investigation. This happens because therapists are only trained to report suspicions of abuse, not to make the final determination — that is left to specially trained investigators.

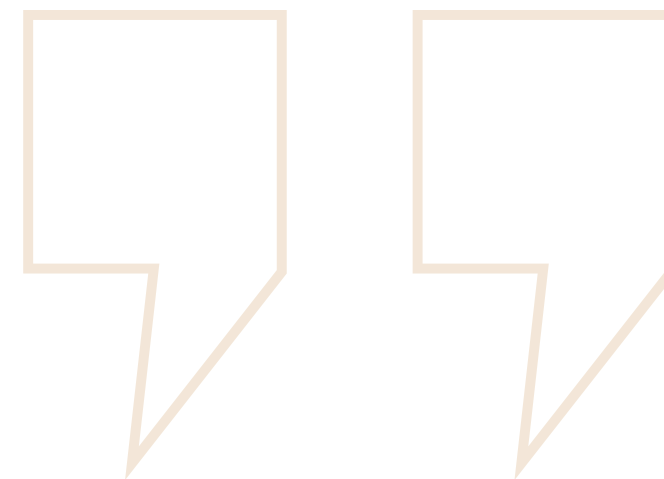
This point is critical for therapists to consider before labeling or validating an adult client's parents as abusive, because unlike in child cases, there is no outside agency to verify whether such suspicions are true. Of course, when severe emotional or physical abuse is clearly present,

we can identify it as abuse — although even in such cases I will usually reach out to a collateral source who knows the family to help confirm context. But when it is not so clear, therapists must remain aware that they were not trained to make abuse determinations and must therefore conduct a careful mini-investigation — such as administering the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire–Short Form (CTQ-SF), which is a verified tool to assess for retrospective childhood abuse, speaking to collaterals, and reviewing any available documentation — before labeling or validating a client's claim that their parents were or are abusive. And, as stated earlier, if alienation is being considered as a response, only a *beis din* of Rabbanim experienced in these cases can make that halachic decision.

The consequences of getting this wrong are too high — unjustified alienation shatters families, damages the alienated child, and destabilizes society as a whole.

Could parents be difficult or challenging?

Of course — but that does not make them abusive. Most people are challenging; human beings are emotionally reactive, and relationships can be complicated



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even with the most easygoing personalities. Hashem gave children to imperfect human beings, not to *malachim*. In fact, if a fallible human being were raised by a perfect, mistake-free angel, that would itself be a form of abuse!

A normal childhood will leave everyone with some scars to work through. Think of every family you know — even the most loving and the most “ideal” — there is a very high chance they are not perfectly functional in every way. Not being perfect, and making mistakes despite genuine effort not to, is not abuse — it is the norm for human beings. Abuse is severe emotional or physical wounding, or the kind of dysfunction where a child’s basic survival needs are not met.

Most parents are loving, try their best, and make mistakes. Most will feel bad, try to repair, and try hard not to repeat them — but like all humans, will likely make new ones. Welcome to the human condition!

What about emotional abuse? For example, a mother constantly telling her daughter she is disgusting for being overweight. People consider that abuse, but it doesn’t meet the legal definition.

It absolutely is abuse — in both *halachah* and psychology. Repeatedly calling a child “disgusting” attacks the child’s core identity and inflicts lasting psychological injury, and this qualifies as abuse. Halachically, *onas devarim* forbids causing emotional pain with words or actions — and this prohibition applies fully to children. There is no way to frame such behavior as anything other than abuse.

Now — there can be differences in *why* the abuse happened, but those differences do not minimize or excuse it. In some cases (again, without excusing it at all) the mother may not be acting out of malice but out of twisted thinking — believing that humiliating her daughter will “help” her be healthier. That does not make it less abusive — it remains abuse — but it means the relationship may be salvageable if she fully stops and expresses genuine regret and tries to repair.

Verified parental abuse causes lifelong wounds. But alienation also causes lifelong wounds. Therefore, only a competent *beis din* can examine the

nuances and render the halachic decision in each case.

Even if the children are wrong to alienate, what can parents, who are the victims, do to fix the situation if the children are not interested in fixing it?

That’s where educating the public — through communal discussions like this and through my book, which I hope will be finished soon, *iyH* — comes in. My hope is that all who read it — including the alienated child — will never think about alienation the same way again, but will recognize that alienation itself is abuse: not only to the parents and extended family members who all suffer tremendously, but also a severe abuse of the alienated child themselves — they will not go through life whole if they sever from imperfect but loving human parents. From this truth, the child is also a victim of the alienation even if they are the one alienating.

People need to learn clearly that alienation is not okay — not halachically, not emotionally, not in any way. Parent-child bonds are for the child’s benefit and for the health of society. Normal human parenting is not abuse, and alienation should never be applied to non-abusive parents. As explained earlier, all cases considering alienation need to consult with a *beis din* to make such a halachic decision.

We need more education in schools and yeshivas about normalizing experiences instead of overreacting. Harav Matisyahu Solomon, *zt”l*, once said that *sinas chinam* doesn’t mean hating for no reason — there is always a reason — it means *overreacting* to the reason. The epitome of such an overreaction is cutting off a parent.

But what if the child is checked out, not answering calls, and totally alienated? How can reconciliation happen?

When the child is not responsive, the work is focused on helping the parent cope with the trauma. Alienation is a real trauma, and this is exactly why therapists — the people trained to treat trauma — must be trained to avoid contributing to alienation; no other category of helper — not a coach, an *askan*, or a friend — is qualified to work with trauma of this magnitude. Alienation is a severe loss — often worse than death — because there is no closure until it is resolved; *Yaakov Avinu mourned for Yosef continuously until he saw him again*.

Furthermore, alienation shatters a parent’s identity, making them question themselves based on a narrative that accuses them of being abusive — when in fact, in most cases, the opposite is true: By far, the parents who are alienated are loving, normal parents and the abuse is something that is happening to them. So the first task is to help the parent reframe how they see themselves: They are not losing their child because they were abusive — they are the ones being abused, along with the child who is being manipulated to alienate from them.

Then the parent must learn that you cannot want a relationship at

all costs. In their desperate longing to have the child back in their life, many parents will even agree to be abused by the returning child, who may feel they are doing their parents a favor by “allowing them back in.” The parent must become strong enough to agree only to a mutually respectful relationship; otherwise, the threat of alienating again may be used as a weapon repeatedly. And even while holding that boundary, it is critical for the parent to understand that the child is, in most cases, a victim of the alienator’s manipulation.

In many cases there is an intentional alienator — often someone with a personality disorder such as narcissistic, anti-social, or borderline personality disorder. They can be charismatic and appear exceptionally kind on the surface, but their goal is power, not peace. They create an echo chamber by recruiting authority figures — a therapist, a Rav, or others — to validate their narrative of abuse. They are extremely hard to see through and often appear to be the innocent party, while the alienated parent — who looks like they are falling apart because of trauma — is misread as the dysfunctional one, when in reality the parent is reacting normally to an abnormal, devastating situation, and the alienator is the disordered abuser.

Education is key for those caught in the middle — people whom the alienated child still keeps in their life and who remain connected to the parents. Their role becomes critical, because they have the power to influence reconciliation when the parent has no access. If you are involved, you cannot pretend the elephant in the room doesn’t exist; silence makes you complicit in the alienation. Even if you risk being cut off yourself, your responsibility is to gently keep naming reality — such as asking questions that poke holes in the narrative. If enough people do this, the child may begin to sense that something is off. A parent can also consider whether there is a trusted person — a friend, cousin, or neighbor — even if they are not currently in contact with the child, who might be able to inter-

vene and influence them toward reconciliation.

Another option that can help when the adult child continues to refuse all contact despite such efforts, is to call them to *beis din*. Many adult children simply do not know that cutoff is *assur* unless it was ruled by the proper halachic authority, nor are they aware of the severe emotional damage they themselves will suffer from unjustified cutoff. The point of calling such a child to *beis din* is not to force love — you cannot force someone to love you — but to bring them to the table so the facts can be heard and a halachic ruling can be made about whether reconciliation should be pursued. This step can also be life-saving in cases where the adult child is being held captive and prevented from reconciling with their parents through coercive control by a third party. If the alienation is justified due to the rare cases of genuine abuse, *beis din* will rule accordingly and protect the child from being pushed back into danger. But if the parent was not abusive, *beis din* can rule that the alienation is *assur* and guide a path to reconciliation, helping prevent the untold lifelong harm that results from cutting off a normal parent.

Ultimately, the parent’s role is to get the support they need to process and come to terms with the trauma, live their best lives despite the alienation, and at the same time exude a loving, welcoming stance toward any child who attempts to reconnect — while not bending over backward for a one-sided relationship. A parent should not demand an apology as a condition for reconciliation — accept that it may never come or it may come on its own, but do not push for it. The main goal and focus must remain on continually rebuilding the relationship through consistent, positive, respectful interactions.

May Hashem heal this wound within Klal Yisrael and bring an end to the suffering of all those experiencing alienation, through genuine reconciliation *b’karov*.

Mrs. Waxman can be contacted via Hamodia. ■

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