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OVER-INVOLVEMENT BY IN-LAWS: RECIPE FOR DISASTER¹

Rabbis and marriage counselors who deal with matrimonial issues report that the over-involvement of parents and in-laws in the lives of their married children is a frequent cause of marital conflict. Even when this over-involvement is not the actual cause of the contention, it will exacerbate it. The nature and degree of over-involvement (and the resulting damage) varies greatly from one case to the other, from mild intrusiveness to attempts at total control.

Over-involvement as a result of “ownership” feelings

It is important to realize that in-law over-involvement does not usually stem from parents' lack of knowledge of the basic principles of the role of in-laws. Rather, its roots can be traced to long before their children's marriage. Over-controlling in-laws were once also over-controlling parents. The same assumption, that children exist for the well being of their parents, prompts parents to feel that they have the right to control all aspects of their young children's lives and will also prompt them to try to control their married children's lives. It is highly unlikely that parents who were sensitive to their children's emotional and developmental needs, particularly their need for developing autonomy and sense of self, will suddenly become over-controlling when their children get married.

The following comment by the eminent Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman illustrates the link between in-law over-involvement and the underlying notion of child ownership. A group of rabbis from an organization dedicated to resolving marital conflicts asked Rav Shteinman to comment on a case where parents who sided with their son in a marital conflict and threatened to withdraw their emotional support if he did not divorce his wife. Rav Shteinman responded:

“They [the parents] are not behaving properly! Parents should not interfere with the married couple or any issue that arises between them. Does the parent own the child? Does any one person own another? No one does!”

¹ Published [with minor modifications] in *Whither Thou Goest: The Jewish In-Law's Survival Guide* by Sorah Shapiro (Devorah Publishing, 2008), Chapter 18, pp. 147-155).

Honoring Parents

One form of over-involvement is where parents demand constant attention from their married children, without regard to the latter's responsibility to their spouses, children or work or study schedule. The parents feel their needs come first! They will demand that their children live nearby (especially if they are footing the bill), regardless of their children's or their spouses' wishes.

Parents often justify these types of unreasonable demands by citing the commandment of honoring parents, thus inducing guilt feelings in their children. This is often done consciously as a control mechanism. This perversion of the *mitzvah* of honoring one's father and mother was condemned years ago in the book entitled *Sefer Habris* (Rav Pinchos Eliyohu of Vilna, 5547):

There are people who are careful not to hurt anyone's feelings; in fact, they treat everyone with love. Yet they hurt their own children and justify it by saying. This behavior is not sinful since the Creator gave me these children and compelled them to accept my discipline with His commandment "Honor your father... My intention is to discipline them in the ways of the Torah." But, in truth, their words are neither logical nor consistent with the Torah, for why should their children not be included in the commandment of "Love your neighbor as yourself"? . The truth is that *í* one is punished more severely for hurting a relative, and therefore one who unjustly causes pain to his own child will be punished accordingly. [Section II, 13:16, free translation]⁴

The obligation of honoring one's father and mother when these parents interfere in their married children's lives was addressed by the distinguished Rav Moshe Shapiro, who was asked: "What is the proper response when in-law interference causes marital problems?"

When such interventions erode peace and harmony in the home, couples should deny their parents entry. If that doesn't work, they should send the parents away in a manner that makes it clear that their parents' intervention has generated this alienation. This is the husband's responsibility. It is obvious that the rule of honoring one's father and mother does not apply here; one is not obligated to put his life aside for his parents' honor. But it is advisable to first consult with an impartial Torah scholar. [*Sefer Binas Hamiddos: Pirkei Hadracha*, published by Binas Halev, Yerushalayim, 5767, p. 86, free translation]⁵

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Examples of overly-demanding and controlling parents and in-laws

- An elderly widowed mother who has always been very critical of her daughter moved in with her daughter and son-in-law. She continued criticizing, but now her son-in-law was often the target. If he tried to defend himself, his mother-in-law became angry and made disparaging comments about it to her daughter, who in turn got upset at her husband. The daughter, who had all her life been intimidated by her mother, was further constrained by what she mistakenly believed to be her obligation to honor parents.
- A young Talmudic scholar had long suffered from his father's abusive over-control. Finally, after he got married, he moved to Israel to get away from his father. But after his mother passed away, his father moved in with him. When the young man tried to raise his children in a more compassionate manner than he was raised, his father accused him of spoiling the children. He felt compelled to follow his father's dictates and so he became much harsher with them than he really wanted. As a result, his children developed psychological problems. In later years, he often apologized to his children for placating his father at their expense.
- A wealthy businessman had always been controlling of his children. When his children got married, they moved away and tried as much as possible to avoid visiting home. The father took offense at this. Since the married children were financially dependent on him to help with their graduate school expenses, he informed them that they would only receive his financial support if they came for an overnight visit at least once in two months.

Misguided attempts to be helpful

Many parents who become over-involved are not primarily motivated by a need to control. Rather, they have a sincere desire to help. When they see their children suffering or behaving unwisely, they feel compelled to intervene. They are incapable of evaluating if their intervention might not cause more harm than good. They can only focus on short-term goals. These parents made the same well-intentioned mistake with their children when they were younger, focusing on their proper superficial behavior with little thought to their children's internalized values and emotional development. An extreme example:

The father of a 17 year old boy who dropped out of school shared with me his worry over his son's inappropriate dress, speech, music, hair style, etc. However, he did have one piece of good news, he assured me. He was able to get his son to agree to pair with a study partner for one hour every day. "How did you manage that?" I wondered out loud.

“Simple,” he responded. “He desperately wanted to take driver’s education, and I told him that I would only agree if he studied every day for an hour. He was furious, but he had no choice but to agree.”

I have related this story to many parents and teachers, and the majority of them thought the father acted wisely. They even conjectured that there is a good chance that this boy will begin to study sincerely as a result of being coerced. Their optimism is bolstered by the statements of rabbinic sages of the past who stated that one who develops the habit of doing a positive act for extrinsic reasons will eventually come to do it with intrinsic motivation and by the words of the *Chinuch* (*Mitzvah* 16) that a person’s heart follows his actions.

These Divinely-inspired words would indeed seem to endorse an emphasis on superficial positive behaviors, with no need to be concerned with the internalization of the values associated with these behaviors. We could just sit back and let nature take its course, as the positive behaviors are automatically internalized. However, Rav Chaim Friedlander clearly states in his *sefer Sifsei Chaim* (*Moadim*, Vol. 2, p. 346), that it is obvious that the *Chinuch*’s dictum that a person’s heart follows his actions and the sages’ assurance that doing a mitzvah or studying for extrinsic reasons will certainly lead to doing it with intrinsic motivation is only true if the person willingly identifies with the positive behavior and not if he is coerced.

In a conversation I was privileged to have with the preeminent Rav Michal Yehuda Lefkowitz in Bnei Brak on June 6, 2007, I related to him the incident mentioned above, where a parent made his 16-year-old son’s driver’s education courses conditional on studying every day with a partner. I told him that many parents and teachers agree that this is a wise move. He responded that, “Anyone who thinks so does not understand the first thing about education.”

An alternative approach

So what can parents or in-laws do when they see a troubling situation in the lives of their married children? How can they show their concern without being intrusive? The answer lies in maintaining a broad, all-encompassing perspective. What can they expect the long-term consequences to be if they intervene? Will their intervention undermine their relationship with their child? Will it cause marital disharmony? Are there ways of expressing their concerns without being considered controlling or intrusive? Only after an honest appraisal can they decide if it is advisable to proceed and, if so, how.

A mother whose daughter was recently engaged came for a consultation. The fiancé had been over to their house a number of times. The parents and siblings noticed a very critical and cynical streak in him which the girl seemed oblivious to. The parents were quite concerned but (to their credit) realized that since they had been overly controlling in the past, if they said something negative to their daughter it might endear him even more to her. I suggested that they say (and mean) the following to her:

“We can see why you want to marry this young man. He certainly has many fine qualities. However, we also notice some troubling aspects, which perhaps you haven’t noticed or paid attention to. We would like to share our concerns with

you so that you can then decide what you'd like to do. If you decide to go ahead and marry him, we will do everything in our power to make him feel like our son. These are some of the troubling qualities we noticed.....”
A week later the mother called to inform me that her daughter broke off the engagement.

In conclusion: If you, as a parent, are contemplating intervening in the affairs of your married child, I would suggest that you first consider the following:

- Parents don't own their children and therefore you don't have a right to intervene. Parents have an obligation to care for their children and so you have to evaluate if there is a way for you to make a helpful contribution.
- If your issue is one of criticism (e. g, you are critical the way he or she dresses or spends money) then there is little chance that saying something will be helpful. If you weren't able to guide your child in what you consider the proper way when he or she was younger, you surely won't succeed now.
- If you are concerned that the couple is experiencing some difficulties and you would like to help, first consider the following: What is the history of your relationship? Does your child look to you for emotional support and advice? Or have you had a conflicted or distant relationship? If it's the latter then the options to intervene in a helpful manner are close to nonexistent. Even if it's the former, proceed with extreme caution especially if your input has not been solicited.
- Perhaps you can mention to your child that you have the impression that he or she may be experiencing some difficulties and that you are ready to help in any way that he or she feels comfortable. Also make it clear that if he or she doesn't want you to get involved you will respect that wish without any negative impact on your relationship.
- Even when your input is solicited by your child be aware that there is a spouse involved who may resent your intervention. When in doubt seek professional guidance.
- Most of all don't do or say anything just to get it off your chest, even though it is obvious that there was little chance that your intervention will be constructive!