

PARENTAL INFLUENCE: POINTS OF INTERVENTION

BY RABBI CHARLES SIMON

INTRODUCTION

- My son has met a wonderful girl. She is everything I could ask for as a prospective daughter in-law except that....
- My daughter has fallen in love with a wonderful guy. He is everything I could have hoped she would find in a potential partner except for one thing.
- What should I say? What should I do? What should we do? When should I say it and how many times?

So many questions and feelings arise when one's children becomes involved with a non-Jew. Each possible response can lead a parent/child relationship down a different road. Even though the situation might not have occurred as yet in your family, parents who anticipate this type of occurrence and devote time discussing how they should respond can enhance their own relationships, as well as pave a foundation for a relationship with the person their child decides to bring home.

In many instances the issues that prospective parents and in-laws of Jews or of non-Jews encounter are the same. At a time in an adult's life when emotional risking could reach an apex, the Jewish community has yet to respond and provide guidance to its members. We need to raise the question in our synagogues and community centers 'how to be an effective in-law'.

On certain levels it doesn't matter if one's children decide to marry within the faith or without; relationships still begin tenuously and need time and trust to build, all the more so, when people from different religious traditions choose to build a life together.

You have raised your child to the best of your ability to live a Jewish life. You might have re-enforced this during your children's post high school period. But once they've entered and have chosen to live in a 'society of choice', there are no guarantees, just possibilities.

You might have informed your children that you disapprove of intermarriage while they were being raised under your roofs, but do you remember how you said it? Do you assume they integrated this stricture into their lives because they were raised in a Jewish household, went to Israel and perhaps attended a Jewish day school or a Jewish camp? After all this time, and now when they have become emotionally involved, do they remember how you said it? Or, will they assume that since they're in love, and you love them, that you will approve.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this essay is to provide any prospective parent with the guidance needed to assist them to realize how to maximize their influence in order to prevent a possible intermarriage. Too often, parents fail to realize the nature of their influence and the opportunities being presented when a relationship begins to develop. The impact of a parent can nurture and it can repel. It can be a source of continuously deepening communications or it can push people into an emotional numbness and sense of loneliness.

Too often the parent, in fear of losing a child, backs away and retreats passively, (What should I have done? What can I do?), rather than anticipating possible situations and meeting them in a constructive well thought out manner. Too often parents react impulsively rather than in a thoughtful united manner. That is why parents need to create a plan. A plan helps parents anticipate the nature of their response, rather than risk the severing of a relationship as a result of

the release of overly intense emotions. This essay raises and suggests key moments in time and possible strategies for responding to your children when these opportunities are present.

THE NATURE AND INFLUENCE OF THE PARENTAL RESPONSE

Parental responses are powerful messages. They have tremendous impact on young adults. In the final sense, they in most cases represent the only remaining opportunity that an adult has to influence a child in our rapidly changing North American community. Unfortunately, we, the parents, too often fail to realize the nature and potential impact we can have on our children's decisions.

Rather than having entered a world of diminishing options and influence, it is important for parents to realize the many opportunities that remain. In order to maximize this impact, it is necessary that both parents understand the nature of their feelings and their responses. There are responses that could drive a child away; and there are responses that could succeed in raising questions and creating situations that will force a potential or an existing couple to consider their circumstances and the results of their intended actions.

- I have done my best; I know I shouldn't feel guilty. I don't wish to overreact and push my child away but what should I do? What strategy should we adopt?

or

- Not if you want to remain a son of mine/ours.

Developing an advance strategy can often curb potentially distancing and horrendous consequences. Developing a strategy to talk to your children shouldn't be any more overwhelming than making plans for any other decision. Just as parents jointly attempt to discuss and advise their children about choosing a university or a future career, couples that engage in future planning should jointly determine their parental message.

There are parents who might threaten their child by forbidding to allow the young man or woman in the house or to attend family events. They even might mention that if the relationship becomes more serious they would not attend a wedding or even disinherit their child.

And of course there is the 'sitting shiva' scenario. In some families these are valid responses, even though it places parental loyalty in direct conflict with the loyalty of one's possible future spouse. What is important is that you know your family and are willing to live with the consequences of your actions, and that your response comes only after thoughtful planning.

DON'T CLOUD THE ISSUES

Many of us, even though we might be parents, are still children. Our parents are still living and we are embedded, as are our children, with a desire to please.

Many of us fear our parents' criticisms or are motivated not to cause them pain. They can seem like giants exerting tremendous power and influence and force us to react as if we were still children. How many of us react as children by anticipating and in many cases fearing the responses of our parents? Parental fears and love can cloud the issues and color the nature of our providing our children with an honest parental message.

Allowing the issues to become clouded inhibits the nature of the parental message and places stumbling blocks in front of children. Communicating how your parents (the child's grandparents) can broadcast a double message, one that will not encourage forthright discussion. In fact it might drive a wedge between parents and children. It is important to seriously consider which generation you are striving to save, the one prior to you, or the one that you are trying to

influence. By acting or reverting to the role of a child you might further estrange and endanger the relationship with your children.

My daughter is involved with a non-Jewish man. I am afraid they will marry. I don't want to drive them away but I don't wish to accept them without having my feelings acknowledged.

I know if I am too adamant I might drive them away, but what if they overstep my limits. What should I do? What should I tell the family?

We are having a bar mitzvah in the family next month should he be invited?
Perhaps we should extend the invitation for Purim or the Passover Seder. It certainly would be more appropriate than Yom Kippur. I know it would be appropriate but my mother will have a fit!
How do I balance being a parent and being a child?

Can we live with our parents' criticisms? Do I need to explain to my child that his/her partner or intended spouse will not be invited to our family simcha (joyful event) because we fear the reactions our parents might have?

- I can't have you invite him to a Seder; my father would kill me?

How much time have we spent discussing how we should speak to our parents rather than threaten a relationship with our child. How often have we given in to our fears rather than confront them directly.

THE INTERFAITH RELATIONSHIP IS LEADING TO MARRIAGE - NOW WHAT?

What if, despite your best efforts, the relationship moves to the next step - marriage?
In many instances, the issues of prospective parents and in-laws of Jews and non-Jews are the same. In each case, when emotional risk-taking could reach an apex, the Jewish community has never even considered providing guidance to its members. We have yet to raise the question in most of our synagogues and community centers

- " How can I be an effective in-law?"

FIRST MEETINGS

Everyone will be uncomfortable and emotions will be complicated. Is this the place to launch into a tirade and throw him out? Is this the time, to begin a heart to heart discussion about conversion and raising Jewish children? Have you considered what type of language will bring him/them closer to you and what type of language will have the opposite effect? What ground rules exist for that first meeting and above all, who makes them?

YOU, THE PARENT SET THE GROUND RULES

It's important to distinguish, if possible, between a family or religious life cycle event and a "let's have that serious talk meeting". A Seder is a different type of interaction than a private conversation to "get to know the prospective in-law". One would suggest meeting the prospective in-law with warmth and openness, but not bringing up the issue at a family event. That is a discussion that needs to be relegated to a private venue.

WHAT IS A PROSPECTIVE SON-IN-LAW LOOKING FOR FROM A FATHER-IN-LAW?

One can generally assume that a prospective son or daughter-in-law would like to establish a warm relationship with his/her future in-laws. In order to succeed with this first act, it is necessary that parents meet their prospective in-laws with comfort and respect. Prior to this meeting it is important that the prospective father-in law considers how to initiate a heart to heart talk?

Yes it's difficult and parents might need to brace themselves for the responses they receive, but this is one of the best opportunities to provide guidelines for a building relationship. Don't avoid it, put it on the table. How else can you be supportive? How else can you learn where you really stand?

CONCLUSION

Parental Influence should never be underrated. It is important that you the parent remember that

- You have the ability to give a straight message, which can reinforce your child's adulthood.
- You have the ability to challenge young adults to talk about these issues.
- You have the ability to suggest they deal with issues.
- You have the ability to suggest that the marriage or engagement be postponed.
- You have the ability to bring your child and his/her prospective spouse closer to you
- And you have the ability to avoid these concerns and in doing so, miss your opportunity to influence your future children and reinforce their respect for you.

Please choose wisely.

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