



Parashat Vayakhel/Pekudei

How can I Help Restore Peace when Dementia Pulls the Family Sanctuary Apart?

Dear Rebbetzin,

I've been put in a difficult situation acting as a middleman between a daughter and her mother who is undergoing hardship and grief due to the husband's dementia and subsequent placing in a nursing home. The daughter does not understand her mother's hardship in dealing with the emotional strain of the decline of her husband as well as her being overwhelmed by the additional tasks falling on her shoulders. Although the daughter means well, all her activities to honor her father, such as trying to celebrate his 'round' birthday, organizing children to come sing for him, renting musical instruments to do music therapy with him and more is only adding stress to the mother. The mother is doing the best she can; she visits her husband daily and takes care of his essential needs. She is not in a place where she can handle anything extra, such as her daughter's creative ideas and initiatives. Moreover, these initiatives exposes her husband's decline, which the mother is working hard to keep private. The daughter feels very attached to her father but lives abroad. She gets very hurt every time her suggestions to make her father happy are shut down. How can we help the daughter better understand her mother and become more supportive of her?

Sima Weinberg (name changed)

Dear Sima,

It is very kind of you to care so much about your friend and her grief and to reach out to be helpful. Dementia is called the disease of the relatives because it affects them more than most other illnesses. Sickness in general puts a strain on the family relations, and it is very nice of you to want to help bring the mother and daughter closer and help them support one another in their grief. I can only imagine how hard it must be for your friend to watch her husband deteriorate and become a shadow of himself, in addition to having to manage all the responsibilities of the household alone, herself no longer a youngster. It is possible that she also may have pent up guilt feelings for placing her husband in a home, and for not being able to do more. Perhaps her daughter's initiatives exacerbates these feelings, reminding her of her own limitations. It is important that your friend have friends like you, with whom she can express her feelings and get support.

Dementia – the Relatives' Disease

Dementia definitely hits the wife hardest, but do not belittle the grief of the daughter, who experiences her beloved father – her protector and stronghold – degenerating, while being unable to help. It seems like the mother and daughter have opposite ways of dealing with their grief. The mother, as you mention, has been trying hard to shield her husband from the rest of the world in order not to expose his debility. Perhaps the daughter feels that having dementia at an advanced age is not necessarily something embarrassing that needs to be swept under the rug. Actually, almost half of the world population has dementia by the age of 90. Yet, it is important to help the daughter understand her mother, and not take it personally when her initiatives to help are rejected. She needs to understand the strain her mother is under, which may cause her to overreact in her opposition to her daughter's desire to make her father happy. You can be helpful to your friend by helping her to see her daughter in a more objective light and learn to appreciate her initiatives to

help even while living abroad. It is not easy to be living in another country while one's parents are in need, especially not when being repeatedly rejected by one's mother, while trying to be helpful.

Contributing to the Family Sanctuary According to Desire and Ability

It sounds like the daughter has a lot of energy and desire to help. You mentioned that she is very attached to her father, and it may be possible that she has a better understanding of his needs than others do. It would be good for the mother to take advantage of this and discuss with her daughter ways that she can be helpful. The family is like a sanctuary and for the sanctuary; each person contributes his or her particular gifts according to their ability to give:

ספר שמות פרק לה (כט) כָּל אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר נָדַב לִבָּם אֶתֶם לְהַבְיֵא לְכֹל הַמְּלָאכָה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּיַד מֹשֶׁה הַבְּיָאוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נְדָבָה לַהֲשֵׁם:

“All the men and women whose hearts moved them to bring anything for the work that Hashem commanded through Moshe to be done, they, the children of Israel bought it as a free will offering to Hashem” (Shemot 35:29).

If you can be instrumental in helping the mother and daughter to allow each other to contribute to the family according to their respective abilities and talents while learning to support and appreciate one another, then you have indeed add a building block for the Temple.