

## Chapter 24

# *What is the Halacha of In-Laws?*

*by Rabbi Michael J. Broyde*

**T**he most prominent in-law in the Torah (and even in our Jewish tradition) is undoubtedly Yitro, who provides Moshe with an incredibly profound piece of structural advice that reverberates through all of Jewish law. Yitro insists that Moshe create an appellate system to do most of the work in judging the Jewish people. Of course, the creation of an appellate system also mandates that laws be created so that lower court judges who have no relationship with God comparable to Moshe's still know what to do. Thus, Yitro's insight creates a framework in which the Ten Commandments – and indeed, ultimately all of the legal structure of Torah – can be given.

Without this insight from his father-in-law, Moshe might well have created a Jewish law system in which he was the sole oracle and Jewish law never fully revealed. All of this derives from a father-in-law's comment to his busy son-in-law that he is "working much too hard" and needs to find a way to restructure his work life. Indeed, Yitro wasn't Jewish, wasn't a tzaddik, wasn't by tradition the most righteous person in the world, and

certainly was not a talmid chacham, but his simple advice to his hard-working son-in-law changed the very future and destiny of the Jewish people.

None of us is Moshe, few of us worry about the fate of the Jewish people or whether the Egyptians will attack or when Amalek will prey on us next, and we don't walk around with the burdens Moshe undoubtedly felt. All of us, however, have in-laws (or hope to have in-laws) who give us advice. And each and every one of us, when we hear this advice, probably says to him- or herself, "What does this person know about my life? How can this person, who didn't even raise me and whom I hardly know really be able to give me advice of any value?" Yet the basic lesson of Yitro's interaction with Moshe is exactly that Moshe was wise enough to listen closely to the sincerely given, loving advice from his parent-in-law who saw him working too hard and worried about his health and welfare.

*Halacha* (Jewish law) recognizes the intuitive obligation to respect one's parents. Your mother and father raised you, they know you well, they provided you with the life skills that formed you. The notion that one should honor and respect – indeed, revere – one's parents is natural; it is also logical. One could readily think that there is no corresponding obligation to honor one's in-laws – after all, they didn't raise you, they didn't participate in your life in any profound way. At first glance, it is easier to understand the halacha that says you should respect your elder brother, who, after all, is a somewhat parental figure, than to respect your in-laws, people who come into your life when you are already a fully formed adult.

But yet, Jewish law mandates that one respect one's in-laws because they care deeply about you and seek to provide you with the best advice available to you in your circumstances. As the *Aruch Hashulchan* puts it, "A person is obligated to honor his mother-in-law and father-in-law; we see this from the verse which indicates that David called Shaul his father as a sign of respect since he was married to Shaul's daughter" (*Yoreh Deah* 240:42).

The fact that notwithstanding Shaul's deficiencies and imperfect relationship with the future King David, David felt obligated to respect him, speaks volumes about how seriously the Rabbis understood this obligation.

There are three ways to explain this obligation of respect. The first (found in the *Bach*, *Yoreh Deah* 240) is that one needs to respect one's in-laws as one respects any esteemed person with whom one interacts. But this seems incomplete, as the relationship between oneself and one's in-laws is different from the relationship between oneself and other esteemed people.

Another possibility (See *Pischei Teshuvah*, *Yoreh Deah* 240:20) is that one has to respect one's in-laws as a sign of respect for one's spouse. But this, too, doesn't explain the totality of the picture. After all, the relationship one has with one's spouse (a respectful, intimate, warm, loving relationship) does not seem at all parallel to the relationship one has with one's in-laws.

Rather, as the *Tur* (*Yoreh Deah* 240) implies, a third possibility seems to be the correct one. The relationship between a son-in-law and his parents-in-law or a daughter-in-law and her parents-in-law is different from the relationship between a parent and child or a younger sibling and older brother. But it is still a relationship of deep caring grounded in adulthood. For that reason, the Rabbis mandated that one show respect to one's in-laws appropriate to the recognition of the fact that your in-laws have come into your life later, but they wish to interact with you in a way that helps you and facilitates your growth as a human being. Such people are worthy of respect.

Of course, one need not interact with one's in-laws in the same reverential way that one interacts with one's parents (one may, for instance, call one's in-laws by their first name, though it is appropriate to add a reverential title in front of it; so I, for instance, call my mother-in-law Savta Penina and my father-in-law Saba Gershon). But yet, this model, in which a healthy dose of respect without the absolute reverence that one must show to one's parents should never be understood as allowing someone

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to shrug off the wise advice mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law frequently can provide.

Without this insight, in fact, we would be a different kind of Jewish people. Moshe could have turned to his older brother Aaron and said, "Who is Yitro, this stranger, to tell me how to structure my life?" The Ten Commandments and indeed all of Torah would not have been given in the form we know, and our world would be completely different. One can say with a degree of confidence that our Jewish tradition is structured the way it is because a wise son-in-law listened to the sage advice of his thoughtful father-in-law. We should all conduct ourselves that way. This is even more so true in our modern times where, upon marriage, a young couple is not forced to choose between a life with his parents or her parents, but can keep a close relationship with their in-laws wherever they might live.

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