

'10 COMMANDMENTS' FOR GETTING ALONG WITH *DIFFICULT* ADULT SIBLINGS

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הִנֵּה מַה-טוֹב, וּמַה-נְּעִים-- Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for
שְׁבֵת אֶחָיִם גַּם-יַחְדָּ. brethren to dwell together in unity! (*Tehillim 133,1*)

Besides my training in Torah, psychology, and many years of counseling others, my insights into this matter come from life experience, maintaining an excellent sibling relationship. The guidelines brought down here are based far more on situations other than my own. However, while my own brother (we have no third sibling) is a best friend, a kind and brilliant man of good conscience and character, not a "difficult adult sibling", it is a relationship that took both of us years of work and learning life's rules, like any relationship.

For so many in less fortunate situations, getting along with difficult, adult siblings can be a serious challenge, but it's usually never too late to turn things around, or make a fresh, new start.



My own, dear brother and I performing together at my son's Bar Mitzvah

1. **Know Its Importance:** Know that having at least a basic, low-level, friendly, speaking relationship with your siblings is almost *a must* in life. You need not be good friends or share much that is personal, *but you must be able to discuss important things, and act in one another's interest.* At the very least, you will one day need to share the responsibilities of taking care of your old parents and their property, and you do want anyone disputing your part of the inheritance.

Beyond that, having loving siblings on good terms with you can help in all sorts of unforeseen ways: they can shoulder your responsibilities in child-rearing, and give you basic company with whom to enjoy life's special moments: holidays, kids' birthdays, etc. Even beyond that, good siblinghood can be one of the real long-lasting joys of life.

If you are a parent, a simple and very effective way to navigating, improving, or restoring a tough sibling relationship is to simply practice what you teach your own children (or would teach if you had them). We tell our kids just how important it is to put our pride aside and get along with our siblings. Do we live that truth in our own relationships? If you were your own child, how you guide him/her? Are you watching *your* tone of voice? Are you stopping yourself from being selfish, judgmental, or self-righteous? Are you giving in, and doing the right thing because it is right?

2. Problem Prevention -- BE a Good Sibling: It is crucial to keep up regular good vibes. That means calling on birthdays, and sending cards, and/or small gifts before holidays, and speaking at least every 2 weeks or so.

When you have one of your regular talks, it can and *should* be short and simple, so as not to burden either side. Respect privacy: do not pry into his/her personal life. If your sibling asks a private question that you're not comfortable answering, try to change the subject. If it's not possible, just laugh it off in a funny way -- something like "uh-oh... can't talk about that!" In general, keep conversation *light*, nothing heavy. Laughing is medicine, and who should understand one another's jokes better than siblings? All it takes is one time to break the ice: one silly look, one roll of the eyes, one quiet, sly remark that brings a smile...

The minimal ingredients of a standard call should be (1) a nice opening (i.e. "it's good to hear your voice", "wow, it's been so long), (2) asking how each other are doing, (3) sharing, at least in general terms, what's happening in your lives, (4) *listening* to other sibling and identifying with his/her emotions ("wow, that must have been fun/scary/upsetting/crazy/etc.), (5) throwing in a joke, or reminding them of something funny from childhood, (6) reminding each other of an upcoming family event (7) wishing your best, sending love. Finally, learn the art of **active listening**, which involves *mirroring*: When your sibling explains something to you, repeat back, in your own words what you just said and empathize. It shows that you really value your sibling's words, and ensures that you heard right. There is no need to advise or lecture: just listen and empathize -- *be a friend, not a counselor!*

Your sibling: "Last few days have been crazy at work. Darn boss just doesn't have a clue, doesn't give us all the info we need, and we're supposed churn out these perfect reports..."

You: "You mean you're not getting what you need to do your job, and you're supposed to turn out perfect work? That doesn't sound fair -- that must be so stressful. What do you think you should do about it?"

... I have an idea: why don't we do something to de-stress. Want to go out for a beer/ice cream this *motza'ei Shabbat*? [Or if you live far away:] "Check out this hilarious video -- this will take your mind off of work!"

Notice: unless it's an extreme situation that you understand well, don't curse the boss, or be quick to advise your sibling to get a new job. If he does and it fails, you might be blamed for it (however unfair that would be).

Don't be stressed over small arguments; they are a normal part of any normal, healthy relationship. Siblings commonly feel free to share opinions with one another that they wouldn't with others, so you will definitely argue! But don't take your differences of opinion to heart -- it's just the adult way that siblings wrestle with each other, like you used to wrestle as kids. To prevent things from heating up, don't take things too seriously, be sure to mind your volume, smile now and then, try to bring it to point on which you agree, and if you can't, just change the subject, and don't bring up the difference whenever you meet or talk. If ever things descend into an quarrel, see Point 7 below.

To maintain a good relationship, don't join in activities that are likely to arouse tension. For example, unless you (1) love and respect each other deeply, (2) work very well together over many years, (3) and each of you has very clear assets to contribute and (4) have clearly-delineated roles to play, **do not go into business together**. (In general, you should never hire or bring into your business anyone whom you cannot fire, or give strong rebuke. The stress of sort of environment can ruin a friendship.)

Finally, remember that part of being a good sibling is knowing that, if he/she is impoverished, according to halakhah, your poor sibling (who cannot afford his basic needs) has highest priority on your tzedakah dollars. When you give to charity, if you pass up your poor sibling who commonly frowns at you, in order to donate to the shul rabbi who smiles and blesses you, you are transgressing. As the Prophet Isaiah wrote, "Do not hide thyself from your own flesh" (Isaiah 58,7).

3. Emotional Independence: When you are speaking to, or together with a moody or controlling sibling, remind yourself regularly: *"My feeling of self-worth and inner happiness do not depend on the attitudes and moods of others."* Once you separate yourself emotionally from the feelings of your siblings -- while still caring for them (wishing for their best), you will be able to maintain your inner calm, being much less affected by their outbursts.

4. Talking with Difficult Siblings: Regarding siblings with whom you have serious differences: choose to not bring up subjects on topics that divide you; when you speak, focus on what you all have *in common*. Listen more than you speak. Active listening to your sibling not only fulfills a real need they have, it saves you from saying something that will set them off.

5. Control Thy Temper: Learn to recognize your own anger threshold; the point just before you are about to lose emotional control. When you see signs that you are about to lose it, follow advice for anger control:

- a. Go into "quiet mode", because allowing yourself to speak will unleash a tirade on those around you.
- b. If necessary, take yourself out of the environment (leave the room, if not the house).
- c. Take a drink of cool water.
- d. To take your heart-rate down, breathe 4 x 4 x 4: Breathe in for 4 seconds, Hold for 4 seconds, breathe out for 4 seconds.
- e. Think about your objectives, and if those require speaking to the person, do so in a soft, low tone, and away from others, if possible.

6. Let Live and Forgive, But Only to a Point: In general, when people are weak (passions are inflamed, or people are tired), speak as little as possible. Remaining silent does not mean you agree. Live and let live, forgive and forget -- we are all only human, and fighting might harm your wellbeing even more than your sibling's.

Nonetheless, do not let hurt feelings build up, sweeping them under the carpet until you eventually blow up or become sick (pent up resentment can, over a long time period, cause cancer)! There are rare times when tough talk **MUST** happen -- one that is likely to become a quarrel. Although it's unpleasant and hard to emotionally hard to go through, having a bit of a tussle can even be necessary to stop a deteriorating situation. If it has to happen, be smart...

7. How to Fight:

- a. **No Typing!** Email and typed messaging is the **WORST** form of communication on any sensitive matter. So much information is lost, not seeing the person's face or hearing their tone of voice. Try your best to speak in person, or by phone.
- b. **Picking the Right Time (If Possible).** If you can help it, determine when to have your "tough talk". Try to pick a time when it is not night time, and neither one of you is hungry or tired. If the timing is wrong, things are very likely to become ugly, because people cannot control themselves well at those times. If someone tries to pick a fight at a time of weakness, try to diffuse the situation in any way you can. Refusing to respond

generally does the trick; a one-sided fight achieves nothing for the fuming sibling. Just keep repeating (if necessary), in a low tone, "we can talk about this tomorrow", or "after lunch", or "in private", etc.

c. **Have Clear Objectives Ahead of Time:** What you want to achieve, what you want to convince the sibling of, what facts, observations, and logic you will try to use (what they are most likely to accept), and to what point are you prepared to let the fight escalate (if it gets ugly) -- lest major damage occur. (see Point 71 below)

d. **Try to Be Alone**, or in the proximity of a mature, older family member who will hopefully take your side or help mediate -- but never in front of children or the old, if at all possible.

e. **Invite the Sibling Unload First**, and blow off as much steam as they can. This will prepare them to listen. Stay calm and at least pretend to be listening calmly and attentively the entire time. Distance your emotions; ignore any insults. You may discover that you, yourself, were or did wrong. If so, *open your response with a full, and sincere apology on that point.*

f. **Keep Your Volume Low the Entire Time.** This will force them to be quiet enough to hear you, and likely cause them to bring their tone down as well. It will also help you think clearly, keeping your own emotions from boiling over.

g. **Don't Cry (try):** So long as you can speak clearly and intelligently, it is okay to tear up a little, but if it causes you to sob and lose emotional control, be strong and *control thyself!* Show the errant sibling who is the adult in this conversation, and that you do not request their pity, but their basic respect.

h. **Make Your Good Intentions Clear:** When you respond, make it clear that -- whether they believe it or not, your only intention is their good and the good of the family. Try to open a point with, "with all respect -- and I really give you the maximum benefit of the doubt..."

i. **"Empty the Cup" First!** All of us have a "full cup", so to speak. We are emotionally full from all the stress, guilt, and all we need to take from family, "friends", our boss, co-workers, etc. Add any more and our "cup" "overflows": we get defensive and fire back. Before you state what upsets you, open with something good about your sibling -- a genuine compliment that "empties" a bit from his/her "cup". This reminds your sibling that you really value him/her.

Remember: if your sibling truly has done something awful or behaved badly, how can you lift him/her out of their pit? Prepare to speak in a way that doesn't crush your sibling; *but will enable him/her to return to the light and save face.*

j. **No Shouting, Insults, or Name-Calling:** Especially the last two create enmity, and they turn the interaction into a gorilla match (who is the tougher, meaner monkey) -- achieving nothing but hurt feelings. Even if the sibling does this, show him/her who is the adult. You can even comment, "I'm sorry you feel you need to use bad words and insults to make your point. Know that they do not make your case any more convincing, while speaking kindly just might."

k. **Try to Use "I" Statements (Stating How YOU feel):** Try not to directly accuse your sibling, if possible. You can say something along the lines of: "Maybe it's just a 'me-thing' but I just can't stand it any longer that I am the only one who washes dishes here..."

1. **Know When to Jump Ship:** If it becomes clear the interaction MUST end immediately before serious damage to the relationship happens, you must end it as quickly as possible. But do your BEST not to simply, coldly hang up the phone. That is a major slap in the face, and could put a total end to your communication (especially if things are already shaky between you)! If you can't get your sibling to stop his tirade on a phone call in any other way, you can simply interject with something like "sorry, I don't want this to get any worse. Love you, we can talk another time -- bye" and hang up.)

m. **The Aftermath:** If the quarrel ends decently, try to end the interaction with a joke, if at all possible -- *even if it's lame*. If it was a heated quarrel, do a small something nice for your sibling. If it was a bad fight, let a day or so pass first, while emotions simmer down. It can be something as small as a small note like, "Hey -- I still love you!", or "you're still my big sister!" That lets your sibling understand that, no matter who "won" or "lost", he/she is still important to you; the relationship must go on, even if it's "on low-flame".

8. **Respect Your Sibling as a Free Human Being:** You need not condone or support, in any way, your sibling's wrong choices or beliefs, but you must respect his/her right to make and have them, and yes -- his right to his mistakes (within reason, of course!) -- just as you have surely made your own. Just as you demand your freedom to your choices in life, he/she deserves no less (within reason, of course!). You can hope they will change on their own, but **don't expect it**, and *do not offer advice or constructive criticism unless your sibling invites you to*. And if you are offered that chance, do not expect the sibling to actually follow your advice. Lowering your expectations will save you much pain.

Remember: as hard as it is, except in extreme situations, do not judge -- that's only for *HaShem*. You are not in your sibling's shoes; you do not share their psychology or all their issues.

If, outside extreme circumstances, you cannot hold yourself back from trying to steer your sibling's life, you might have a "control issue", and you might consider seeking counseling.

9. **There is No Perfect Fairness:** The job of a sibling is not about equal, mutual give and take because that's largely impossible. You live in different environments, have differing levels of how busy you are, success, intelligence, social acumen, and more. Ultimately, you give what you feel you can, and convince yourself that your sibling is giving whatever he/she is emotionally capable of. That's what benefit of the doubt is all about. *If you give such benefit of the doubt to your friends, you can surely give it to your sibling!* Beyond that, we can only trust that *HaShem* will reward and punish each and every one of us according to our true scorecard.

10. **It's not About Your Sibling "Deserving" Anything.** Relationships that feel one-sided (you give much more than the other) can be very emotionally difficult. Just remember: so long as you do not sacrifice yourself beyond what is healthy, we try to act nobly with others (and not to be dragged down to the low level of others) for *HaShem's* Sake. We do what is right because it is right, not for the sake of human beings, *who can be so disappointing*. One of our key purposes in this world is to sanctify *HaShem's* Name, and in most cases, acting kindly towards a sibling who may seem "undeserving" is part of that job description.

Beyond that, there plenty of reasons to keep up a basically good relationship, even if it feels very "one-sided". Firstly, you are respecting your parents by maintaining basically good relations. And if not for their sake, then keep it going for your kids' sake (unless the sibling is truly a bad example). Remember: you are setting an example for how they will relate to one another.

Finally, you, too, probably have what to gain (see Point 1). Just as nastiness and contempt creates the same from the other side, kindness, good listening skills, and refusing to judge invites and encourages the same from your sibling's side. At the very least, you might see the end to

that gnawing tension and ache in the heart whenever your sibling comes into the picture, in thought or conversation. At the most, you just might discover a "new" friend you always could and should have had, without realizing just how possible it was.

May *HaShem* bless you and your families, so that the light of Torah spreads even to darker corners of our lives.