

Jewish Divorce Talk

Episode Eight – Narcissism and Parental Alienation Talk

Baer: Hello and welcome to "Jewish Divorce Talk," a show about divorce, separation, co-parenting and other unique considerations that arise when couples divorce in the Jewish world. I'm your host, Eliana Baer, New Jersey divorce lawyer and partner at Fox Rothschild, a national law firm with over a thousand attorneys across 29 offices, offering over 70 diverse services.

On each episode, I'm joined by experts and guests who discuss divorce and related topics from different angles to give their opinions and perspectives that often challenge the way people view divorce in the Jewish community, countering the stigma and driving for reform.

On this episode, I'm joined by Morton Fridman, M.D., a board certified child, adolescent and adult psychiatrist and psychoanalyst practicing in Teaneck in Bergen County, New Jersey. As a medical doctor and therapist, Dr. Fridman combines an understanding of the mind and brain to help treat people with mental health issues.

Dr. Fridman sees people with a range of difficulties, including anxiety, depression, ADHD, OCD and bipolar disorder. Modalities of treatment include individual therapy, couples therapy and medication.

Dr. Fridman's training as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst have made him a sought-after therapist for many individuals who have characterological issues that make it difficult for them to get along with others. We live in a narcissistic culture. Our "me first" culture has seeped from the general society into the Frum world. Dr. Fridman sees many people with narcissistic personalities to help them develop the insight to relate in a more healthy manner to others.

In addition to his clinical practice, Dr. Fridman has a forensic practice. He has been an expert in hundreds of family law cases, including custody evaluations, relocation cases and parental coordination, in addition to other areas of forensics, including employment, personal injury and malpractice.

Today, our focus will be on narcissism and how it affects child custody proceedings, including the highly charged realm of parental alienation.

Welcome to the podcast, Dr. Fridman. I'm so happy you were able to join me today.

Dr. Fridman: Thanks so much. And of course, we were joking about this before, but I'm gonna say it again: Call me Mort.

Baer: And I said, I'm not gonna do that.

Dr. Fridman: Okay.

Baer: It's almost like seeing your math teacher out and about and they tell you to call them by their first name and you just can't do it. Because we know each other in a professional setting, and you're definitely qualified to be called doctor and I shall continue to do so. So, I hope you don't mind.

Dr. Fridman: Well, thank you so much, and you're definitely qualified to do a podcast, but I must admit, this is actually only the second podcast I've done. The first was a friend who does a podcast where he asks people what is their favorite passuk in Tanakh? What is their favorite verse in the Bible?

And I picked one which actually is my favorite verse, but would probably be applicable to this talk as well. It's the passuk in Michah, the verse in the prophet Micah that says, "Ma Hashem Elokecha doresh mimcha ki im asot mishpat v'ahavat chessed v'hatzneah lechet im Elokecha."

Act justly, love kindness and do it humbly," you know? So to do the right thing, do it kindly and do it humbly. We're gonna be talking about narcissism. I gotta tell you, there's no passuk in the Torah, there's no verse in the Bible that says, "It's all about me." But yeah, I kind of think that podcast might have prepared me well for this one.

Baer: Absolutely. And this topic is actually very near and dear to my heart, only because these types of cases really stick with me. The parental alienation cases, the narcissistic abuse type of cases. It's a very extensive topic, and we're all trying to do the right thing on it. Obviously, bringing yourself back to that passuk and that podcast, certainly we're all trying to do the right thing, and we deal with these issues and they're very difficult in our daily practice. And they really do weigh on me, certainly.

And I can tell you that these are some of my most intense cases, as I'm sure they are for you also. Because this issue, as an attorney at the very least, needs to be dealt with swiftly and needs to be dealt with aggressively. Because if you don't, as you know, it can snowball and it gets to the point of, like, really being an irreparable type of situation.

And I do see it manifesting recently more disproportionately in the Jewish community. Which I see as a very sad byproduct of society in general, that it is trickling down to the Jewish community, and again, in disproportionate levels. And these are some of my most heart-wrenching cases. But many of the institutions that you and I deal with in our practices are not really educated on the nuances of it, and that could be really harmful both to children, obviously, and to the targeted parent themselves who loses a relationship with a child, potentially.

And I'm sure there are larger components to this and a larger profile to the person who is alienated and alienating. But one of those components, obviously, is narcissistic personality disorder, and I think that's really a good place to start because I see that -- and I'm sure you see it too -- as being really prevalent in these types of cases.

So, can you just give an overview? What is narcissistic personality disorder, and how does it manifest in individuals on a general level?

Dr. Fridman: Sure. And you really raised an important point, which is that we're seeing so much more of it in our community. Years ago, I heard a talk by a very prominent person on sort of society's influence on Frum or observant communities. And this person said we, the Frum community, are like about 10

years late to everything. So, whatever society's problems are, they eventually get to us. But, you know, takes us a little while.

And that's, in the case of narcissism, very unfortunate, because, it was almost the mark of a Jew over the centuries to be a humble person. They say Moshe Rabbeinu -- Moses -- our great teacher, was *anav micol adam*, the humblest of all people. And that really used to be such a characteristic that defined Jews.

But the fact is, we are subject to all the same emotional problems that anyone else can have. And we live in a culture of narcissism. I joked earlier that there is no passuk, there is no verse in the Torah, that says it's all about me. Whether you're on Instagram or TikTok or anywhere out there, it is quote unquote "All about me." And the messages that people get from society is not only that's okay, but that's a good thing and that's a healthy thing.

Torah-observing Jews really shouldn't be buying that. And we know that what Chazal, what the sages, say is, "Im ain ani li mi li, im ani l'atzmi, ma ani?" "If I'm not for myself who's going to be for me, but if I'm only for myself, what am I?"

In our general culture, people somehow heard only the first half of that ma'amar Chazal, that saying of the sages. And people say, "Yeah I gotta be for me."

The legend of Narcissus is from Greek mythology. And Narcissist was this individual who, you know, I guess there were no mirrors back in the day. And he went and he was overlooking a lake. And he was so taken by his own image, seeing his own image in the lake, that he fell in and drowned himself. And there's a moral to that story: If it's all about you, it ain't gonna work out in the end.

The psychiatric community has its own Torah called the DSM-5. The American Psychiatric Association puts out a diagnostic and statistical manual. And what it says per personality disorders are they're a pervasive pattern of relating to the world that starts in earliest childhood.

Now, in addition to being a medical doctor and psychiatrist, I'm also a psychoanalyst. The approach I take is to help people reflect on themselves. And way before there was even a DSM-1, the psychoanalytic community recognized narcissistic character. And these are people that everybody knows. Everybody's either got a neighbor or a friend or a colleague at work who's totally self-absorbed. It's all about them. And they just have no empathy for anybody else. They're just doing their thing, putting themselves first with just no appreciation that anybody around them has got feelings of their own and that the people around them and their feelings count just as much. And we all know in a healthy marriage, you gotta really be committed to giving more than you get. That's not something narcissists are particularly good at.

Baer: I find also with narcissistic personality disorder, there are certain, I'll call them comorbidities-- and I know that's a term of art in the medical community, but I'm using it as a layperson -- certain things that I see that tend to manifest in the context of these personality disorders that are almost like I could predict them. Such as extramarital affairs. Such as abusive type of behavior. Even if it's not physical abuse, it could be emotional abuse, mental abuse, psychological torture, things of that nature that tend to just come along with it as like the ugly cousin in the room of narcissistic personality disorder.

Is there a spectrum that you see and a pattern that can be attributed to narcissistic personality disorder, where it balloons and subsumes all these other types of undesirable behaviors that create a very toxic environment in a marriage, including the gaslighting tropes and things of that nature and the abusive types of behavior, abusive adjacent behavior, or abuse itself?

Dr. Fridman: Yeah I think you're exactly right. And you must hang out with a lot of mental health professionals 'cause you've got all our language right down there.

Baer: I sure do. You bet.

Dr. Fridman: Comorbidities, spectrums. You bet. First of all, let's talk about the spectrum. Almost any emotional condition can go from mild to severe.

Again, we've all got friends, neighbors, family members who really enjoy the limelight, who've gotta be the center of attention, who demand a great deal of admiration from those around them. And, if you've got a sense of humor, sometimes you can handle them okay. That would be mild narcissism.

But it can really go all the way to severe, which is what we call malignant narcissism. And these are people who are so self-absorbed that they're toxic, because they're running over everybody else all the time. And they also, interestingly, you step on their foot, they feel completely justified in running over you with a truck, right? Because hey, you stepped on their foot and they're not gonna stand for that 'cause it's all about them. That would be a malignant narcissist. And yeah, it does, to use your expression, bleed into what a psychiatrist would call sociopathy, meaning really abusing others.

So, you gave the example of an affair. We see this all the time. And look, as a therapist, as a psychoanalyst, as a psychiatrist, you have to be compassionate. People make mistakes. They really do. But with a narcissist having an affair, he or she is not making a mistake. That's their life view. "Hey, look, my spouse isn't giving me exactly what I demand. Fine, I'll see somebody else." And they feel very justified in doing so.

Now, the other thing to realize is, narcissist is not a synonym for bad person. Often, narcissists have had -- in addition to sort of a biological predisposition, and I'll get to that in a minute -- you know, they've had childhoods that have led them to view things in a certain way. And they just don't empathize with others and they really think they're right. And they really think that, "I'm not getting what I want. I'm gonna have an affair. You stepped on my foot, I'm gonna run you over with a truck."

That's what therapy's about, getting them to take a look at it. As you point out, it really does bleed into sociopathy where you can see terrible things happening. And, in the context we're talking about -- custody -- it's supposed to be all about the kids. That would be a very difficult thing for a narcissist to see.

Baer: Do you see that often manifesting? We talked about it in the context of a marriage, but in the context of a divorce, I see that all the time where there's a disproportionate reaction, as you described, to even the smallest pokes, right?

Following up on documents: You followed up on documents, I'm pulling my settlement offer. That type of behavior I see a lot in the context of a divorce. How does narcissistic personality disorder overall impact the dynamics in a divorce or separation situation?

Dr. Fridman: Yeah, it really pours gasoline on the fire. I think any mental health professional who's dealing with a divorcing family recognizes that for many people going through a divorce, it's the worst thing that's ever happened to them. Particularly in our community where some people get married at a really young age, they're just totally unprepared for it.

And it can be super, super stressful. And one of the aspects of character is it's sort of a fallback way of doing things, right? You have a friend that's got a super compulsive character, . They're always dotting every "i" and crossing every "t." If that person's going through a divorce, you can bet their documents are really gonna be perfect, because that's their personality. They're compulsive. They wanna get everything right. And when they're under stress, that's gonna be their fallback. "I gotta get everything right here. You asked me for a three-page summary. Yeah, I'm gonna give you a 30-page summary."

The fallback position of a narcissist is, "It's all about me. And obviously, it would be best for my child or children to be with me all the time because my spouse can't hold a candle to me. It's better for my children to be with me. Oh, you think I'm being selfish here? I'm not being selfish. This is for my kids. It's much better for my kids to be with me 'cause I'm great and my spouse is average. I don't know why I married my spouse to begin with 'cause I'm so great. So obviously it'd be better for my kids to be with me. And you know what? Yeah, my spouse stepped on my foot. My spouse was 10 minutes late with his or her discovery. Absolutely I'm filing an emergent motion about that. Nobody has the right to keep me waiting 10 minutes."

And unfortunately, court can be an adversarial system. My feeling about these matters is, it's always good to try to calm things down and smooth things over and try to get through the rough patch of the divorce so that parents can really work together for their children's best interest after the dust settles. Unfortunately, when you have narcissists involved, they can inflame things so badly and make such a war outta the divorce that it really makes it very hard for the dust to settle, and the bad feelings continue way after the divorce.

Baer: What types of challenges after the divorce do you see in the context of co-parenting with an ex-spouse whose psychological profile does include an aspect of narcissistic personality disorder? What we as lawyers see runs the gamut from bad to worse. But what do you see in your practice in terms of the difficulties that arise with co-parenting? And as a follow up to that, how do those difficulties ultimately affect the children?

Dr. Fridman: Sure. So, most of my practice is clinical practice where I'm treating people with psychotherapy, with medication. These might be children, might be teenagers, might be adults. I see lots of couples. And that work really informs the forensic or legal work that I do.

I think I probably told you the story of how I first got involved doing forensic psychiatry. I happened to have a friend who was a family court judge. I was just out of my fellowship. I had just opened my office. And this judge called me and asked me if I wanted to do a custody evaluation. And I said, "Well, you know, I learned all about them in my fellowship. I've never actually done one." And he said, "Y ou know

what, that's just fine 'cause all I'm really looking for is an honest person who's gonna care about the children."

And that's always gotta be the approach. So, the approach that I take in custody matters is really to be informed by my clinical practice. So when I'm dealing with a narcissistic person in my clinical practice, what I'll try to do is to get that person to take a look at themselves. To do some self-reflection. And ask themselves how their approach is really working out for them. The fact that they're running over everybody else around them ... Is that really working out for them?

Now, you have certain malignant narcissists who will answer that question, "Yeah, I'm doing great." And they're gonna be awfully hard to help. But if you have somebody who can take a look and say, "Well yeah, I guess the fact is my spouse is angry at me all the time 'cause I'm selfish. And my colleagues at work are angry at me all the time 'cause I'm selfish. And my neighbors are angry at me all the time 'cause I'm selfish. Maybe it's not working out. And maybe I can take a look at myself. And maybe I do have a biological predisposition to this, but maybe I could look at some of the childhood antecedents, the way I was raised and how I reacted to my home when I was a child, and how I developed these personality characteristics."

So it's the same thing in a forensic context when dealing with custody post-divorce, when dealing with co-parenting. If you can get somebody who's suffering with narcissism to really take a look at things and say how is that affecting your child? That every time your child comes home from the other parent, you're grilling them to find out what the other parent did wrong so you can file some post-divorce suit against them or minimally, complain about it. Is that really good for your child and is that really fostering a healthy relationship between you and your child?

After your child grows up and leaves home, how much of a relationship are they really going to want with you? Do you think they're really going to buy into your belief system that you're the best thing since sliced bread and their other parent is the worst? It can get somebody to take a look at themselves. You're way ahead of the game. Because narcissists really hurt their children.

Let's first just take it into the clinical context, outside of divorce. If you're being raised by somebody who views the world as only their feelings count, what you learn as a toddler is your feelings don't count. And it is tremendously damaging to the self-esteem of toddlers, children, teenagers being raised by narcissists. Same thing in the context of divorce. If one of the parents is co-parenting in a narcissistic manner, it's gonna be extremely damaging to the child. Because they're just not gonna feel like they're worth anything 'cause the message from the narcissistic parent is that only that parent's feelings count.

So, you know, whether it's through a parenting coordinator or an individual therapist for the narcissist, or a family therapist, you wanna try to get the parent to take a look at themselves.

Baer: Yeah, and it's interesting that you've alluded to these spectrums. When it moves into a malignant narcissistic situation, it obviously becomes much more difficult -- I assume -- clinically, to treat and for anybody to be introspective about themselves.

A lot of times I find that those really extreme cases usually go hand in hand with one of our other topics today, which is parental alienation. And that is something that I'm seeing more and more frequently. It's

almost guerrilla warfare -- that's how I describe it -- where there are no rules. Everything goes out the window. Everything is fair game, including the psychological well-being of these children, including their development and well-being, their relationship with the targeted parent. Does that, in your experience, really go hand-in-hand with these extreme narcissistic personality disorder cases?

Dr. Fridman: Very much. I would say that since I've been in practice, parental alienation has been a real problem, but we're just seeing more and more of it as people become more and more narcissistic over time. Again, divorce is so, so stressful for children and all the literature points to it being better for children if they can have healthy relationships with two healthy parents.

Some of the most robust findings in the psychiatric literature about the prognosis of children after divorce have to do with two factors. One is the underlying mental health of the parents. If you have parents who are very disturbed -- and now, a malignant narcissist is very disturbed -- it's really gonna adversely affect the prognosis of the child post-divorce. And the second factor is the degree of hostility between the parents after the divorce. Plenty of people go through very nasty divorces, but then they wake up and smell the coffee and they say, "How much longer do I want this hostility and toxicity in my life? I gotta move past this. I'm just gonna compromise and I'm gonna try to do what's best for my child, even though I feel I had really good reason to get a divorce. That was me and the other parent, I can't take that out on the child."

That's gonna be very difficult for a narcissist to see. And a narcissist who believes that they're the best, as I mentioned. Last time, I said since sliced bread, this time I'll say since ice cream. It's gonna be very hard for them to see that it would really be good for their child to be spending lots of quality time with the other parent.

And we've been talking about trying to get a parent to take a look at that. The more severe pathology, the malignant narcissist, really cannot take a look at that because they don't have the capacity for self-reflection. And there you're gonna have to really have limits set by the court.

The ultimate is if a parent is really alienating their child against the other parent, really poisoning the child against the other parent, that parent may have to lose parenting time in order to learn a lesson.

Now, you don't wanna treat a child like a ping pong ball, and that's a very serious remedy. So, it's always best to try parent coordination, to try individual therapy for the parent, to try family therapy, co-parenting therapy. But if somebody is just not reacting or taking their children's real best interests to heart, sometimes the court has to intervene as a practical matter. And that can be brought up in therapy. And a seasoned therapist can let the parent know, "Listen, I know you don't see it, but believe me, keep it up like this, you're gonna lose parenting time. You might lose custody."

Baer: I find, unfortunately, and I completely agree with what you said in terms of that being an ultimate remedy that a court should -- must -- consider if this behavior is continuing. I question when we wait so long and try all these other interventions first, all the while that parent is engaging in this really damaging behavior. It's as if, you know, you're giving your kid a cigarette. You would never do that and say well, we're gonna try these. Take away the cigarette. We're cutting it off. It's so toxic to the child that it's not something to be trifled with. It's not something to mess around with. And I know, obviously,

courts have their protocols and the psychological community, obviously, and the psychiatric community have their protocols in terms of interventions.

I question and it's just -- from an anecdotal perspective, from what I see out there in the wild as an attorney on a daily basis -- are we waiting too long to invoke what is, I guess, supposed to be a remedy of last resort? Should it be a remedy that we're considering earlier, to cut off this behavior when there's been a diagnosis, when there's been a sustained history of this behavior that continues and persists despite admonitions and directions to cease?

Dr. Fridman: Yes. And we generally do wait way too long. And it may not even get to the point of taking parenting time away or taking custody away if the judge simply makes it clear to the parties and to their attorneys that one more step outta line and that is what's going to happen. So look, I have dealt with some really compassionate and wise judges in almost every county in New Jersey who are really trying to help children.

But you know, there are certain proclivities, right? So in general, I think judges are informed by the psychiatric literature that demonstrates that kids are much better off with healthy relationships with both parents. But what this kind of results in is a certain bias towards 50/50. Now sometimes, 50/50 is great but the first recorded case was that of Shlomo Hamelech, King Solomon, where very, very sadly, there were two babies and two mothers and one of the babies passed away and each of the mothers claimed the live baby was theirs. King Solomon said, "Okay, we'll cut the baby in half, make it 50/50. Each of you will get half." The malignant narcissist mother said, "Sure, I'll take the deal." And the healthy mother said, "No. Give the other mother the baby. Better the baby should be alive." And of course, Shlomo Hamelech awarded custody to the mother who really loved the child. So 50/50 is not always the best remedy.

But it's very hard. Judges are overwhelmed. They have so many cases. So, you know, they are ... As a mental health professional, I always feel it's my responsibility to really write a very clear and coherent report explaining to the court, "Okay, it's not cancer. But narcissistic personality disorder, that's a real problem. This child is not gonna grow up healthy under these circumstances. We've gotta intervene right away, and we've gotta move up the ladder because the child is suffering in the meantime."

Baer: And I'm really glad to hear you say that it's not a default in terms of 50/50 schedule. I know that a lot of mental health professionals, a lot of courts, are moving in that direction. And it is warranted in many cases. In a lot of cases, it is warranted. However, I agree with you that there are a subset of cases where we need, first of all, to look at every single case as an individual case, not just a blanket case where it needs to be a 50/50 schedule. But also specific situations, especially, I think, in the Jewish community where cultural expectations are a little bit different, where the lives of the child themselves, right, the children themselves. Incredibly different from the secular community where maybe, you're going out to a sport after school and it's just a matter of shuffling people around and which parent is doing that.

In the Jewish community, things are obviously very different because the home is the center of life. The block is the center of life where your friends are. There's no going on your device after school. So I think to treat these cases a little bit more delicately is certainly a very large asset that you can tap into to say,

"Okay, I'm not a blanket 50/50 person. We have to look at these cases individually and say what is best for this particular child in this particular community."

But in the context of the Jewish community, on that note, there are also parental alienation cases really coming up with a lot of prevalence and in alarming numbers. To me it's alarming, in the cases that I see with alienation, narcissistic personality disorder.

From an anecdotal perspective, I'm not asking you to make a blanket diagnosis of the Jewish community, but anecdotally, why do you think that might be?

Dr. Fridman: So, I think that's exactly the question. And I think it goes back to what we were talking about earlier. Society's problems seep into the Frum or observing community over time, right? We hold onto our ways, but then we're influenced by outside society. And of course we tell ourselves, "Oh no, we only take the better things. We're really true to the Torah." But guess what? Narcissism is not true to Torah values. And it really has had an increasing influence.

I would say another factor is the affluence of the community. When I was a child, there were many Holocaust survivors in the community, many who never had the opportunity to get an education or move ahead. But our society today is much more affluent, and people have opportunities to do things that they didn't. Including geographical diversity, right? If you have a young couple living in Lakewood and let's say dad is learning in Lakewood and mom is from Muncie.

And guess what, this is another twist for our community. The grandparents are going to be very heavily involved because the parents are so young. So it's not just a question of narcissism in the parents. Often in our community, you have to really take the grandparents into account. It may be that the Lakewood grandparents feel, I can't have this child living in Muncie, and I can't have this child living in Muncie half the time. What if it's not Muncie? What if it's Baltimore? So there are some really complicated questions that come up because of shifts in our society.

First of all, divorce itself is much, much more prevalent. But, if this was the case where, the rare case let's say from my childhood, of people getting divorced. But you know what? Both parents lived in Borough Park. They may have lived on the same street, same community. You're not gonna have these kinds of complications. There's no question where the child is going to school. There's no question where the child is going to shul. There's no question who the child's friends are gonna be. But again, if one set of parents are from Lakewood and the other are from Muncie, it's gonna be different.

Or even in the more modern community, if one set of parents is from Englewood and the other is from LA that's gonna be super, super complicated. And again, the younger the parents are, the more the grandparents are likely to be involved. And then you have their character and personality to take into account as well.

Baer: That's something I hadn't considered actually. That's a really good point that a lot of times this is a multi-generational litigation. Where the grandparents versus -- as opposed -- to the spouses trying to determine between themselves in a private setting what's best for their child, you have the grandparents involved. Sometimes you have the brothers-in-law or the sisters-in-law involved. You have

friends involved. You have everybody chirping about what is best for these children or what is best for these parties.

And a lot of times they run into this paralysis where you don't know who's running the litigation anymore. You don't know who's running the show, who's dictating what your life is going to be post-divorce, where you have to co-parent with this person basically the rest of your life, and somebody else is dictating that. I think that's a foible in general of some of the side effects of what you've been speaking about, which is where other people maybe hold the purse strings or there are certain expectations involved in a young couple's life that they didn't necessarily choose for themselves.

It gets very dicey and to the extent that you have an understanding of that, I mean, that is very clear and certainly you would be in a very good position to help people navigate this portion of their life. Because there are a lot of nuances that really don't exist. You just mentioned one that I didn't quite even consider, and I work obviously very heavily with the Jewish community, so that's an interesting insight. So, I appreciate that.

Dr. Fridman: Well, I'll say that I could count on two hands how many cases of "grandparents rights" I've had in communities other than the Frum community. But I have had so many cases where the court didn't even realize it. And if I can joke around a little bit, it should have been perfectly obvious to the attorneys 'cause who was writing the check, okay, who's paying the bills? The grandparent. And it was perfectly obvious to me as a mental health professional that it wasn't actually the 20-year-old father or the 19-year-old mother who was demanding sole legal custody and granting very little parenting time to the other parent. It was clearly coming from the grandparent.

And again, if there's a touch of narcissism there, the grandparent may truly believe, "I am doing what's best for my grandchild. It will be a wonderful life for my grandchild to grow up in my community. And if they go to that other community, they're less "this" there, they're less "that" there, the less the other thing. I'm doing what's best. Doctor, surely you can see that?" And you have to try to help people see what's really in the best interests of their children, which is fostering healthy relationships.

Listen, it's also true in cases that go to Beth Din, Jewish religious court, the same things come up. And you know, it's just very important to deal actually with the child's real life and what's really best for the child.

Baer: A hundred percent. And we spoke a little bit about strategies that can be implemented for the narcissistic parent. But if the other parent sees that there are certain alienating behaviors that are going on in the part of the narcissistic parent, are there any strategies for that parent, aside from, obviously, from a legal perspective, speaking to your lawyer, figuring out how to navigate the legal system, putting you in touch with the right professionals. Are there any other strategies that the targeted parent can adopt to mitigate the effects, the harmful effects, that this sort of behavior has on the children?

Dr. Fridman: Yes. Be direct. Be assertive. Be strong. So, one of the most common bad combos in a marriage is when one of the spouses is narcissistic and the other spouse is what we call masochistic, meaning very self-effacing, very willing to absorb a lot of punishment. And often narcissists can feel that even on date number one. " Okay, I can tell, I can push her around." Right? And if you're the kind of

person who has spent your whole life being okay with being pushed around and now you are in the most stressful situation of your life, it may be hard for you to stand up.

And again, with a malignant narcissist, you're gonna need a lot of help. But in a somewhat milder case, if you just stand strong and you're direct and you're firm and you're, "Listen, it's not okay that parenting time was scheduled yesterday at five, and you got our four-year-old here at 9:00 p.m. And you may have thought it was great that our child got to spend extra time with you. But 9:00 p.m. is way too late and that simply cannot happen again. I'm not getting into threats with you, but I wanna make clear to you this is the last time." And to hold firm and if necessary, to move it up the ladder, but being very clear, very direct, very assertive.

So, that's a situation where therapy could really help the spouse take a look at him or herself and say, "You know what? I really had a lifelong pattern here of giving in and being trampled on. And you know what? Maybe it really hasn't worked out so well for me, but what's clear is this is not gonna work out well for my child or children. I gotta be more assertive."

Baer: Absolutely. And the dynamic that you described, this narcissist combined with somebody who's a little bit more submissive in terms of their reactions, it's almost like the only relationship dynamic I see in those types of situations. Where, I don't know if it's a chicken or an egg sort of thing, where the narcissist is specifically seeking out somebody with that personality profile or that personality profile of the more submissive spouse develops over time, having been subjected to these types of really beating-down behaviors. But it tends to be really the dynamic I see, which gets very dicey. Because I find, from a legal perspective, the only way to deal with narcissistic personality disorder in the context of these parental alienation cases is to stand up and is to be incredibly aggressive and to say, "We are not tolerating this."

Because the narcissist doesn't expect their spouse to do that. They don't think there are going to be repercussions for their actions. And then when they start seeing, wait a second, I have to rein this behavior in or else, it's going to affect me again, be all about me situation where it's unpleasant for them. They don't think that's going to happen. And when it does happen, it tends to move the case along in the right direction. Not always, sometimes there are really obstinate people who still can't see the light after that occurs. But certainly, that's the type of personality profile where I have to counsel clients to say, "I know that this has been your relationship dynamic. It's time to end it." So it's interesting that from a psychological perspective, the advice is really consistent with what I've seen be successful in these types of cases as an attorney. It just tends to work. But I really think that, still, the mental health profession, attorneys and the legal system could do a better job of addressing these high conflict cases.

Only because -- and it's not a criticism, it's more a function of things just take a long time. We've seen it all the time in terms of custody cases, where a case has started a year ago and we still don't have an expert involved and this behavior just persists and becomes worse and worse. From your perspective, how do you think we as, I guess a whole, meaning judges, attorneys, mental health professionals, because we really work hand in hand with one another to get to the best interest of the child to figure out what those best interests might be. How can we do a better job of managing these types of cases?

Dr. Fridman: I would say that things have gotten better but they're nowhere near where they need to be in terms of mental health intervention, right? The process of divorce is incredibly expensive. And the

last thing a parent wants to hear is, "Oh, by the way you've also gotta get into therapy and your child needs to get into therapy and you need to be seeing a therapist along with your spouse who you're divorcing." Right?

And they're saying, "I don't want marital counseling. I'm out." You gotta explain, "No, no, no. That's not what we're talking about. What we're talking about is, I can already see in the litigation that you are continuing the same bad patterns that led to this divorce."

And by the way, it's an almost constant right, because remember back to the DSM-5, right? Personality is this lifelong, pervasive way of dealing with things. And sometimes it's good, right? Let's say somebody has a sense of humor. Yeah, they're gonna be making jokes, and keeping it light. And that, that can be a great way to be.

But for somebody who's fallback is, "It's all about me. I'm number one." Or somebody who's fallback is, "Sure. Whatever you want, I'll give in." Whether they have always been that way or as you point out, we're traumatized into it, that's how they're gonna approach the divorce. If I'm engaged to do an evaluation, or just to consult with either of the parties or the attorney, what I'll say is, "Yeah, I know you don't want to hear this. And I know how expensive the litigation process is. But you really need intensive psychotherapy right now because it's gonna go from bad to worse. I can already tell you that."

In the example we were talking about where the parent doesn't bring the child who's supposed to be there at five, doesn't bring them back until nine. Let's say the other spouse was strong about it and said, "Listen, this is the last time. Our child's gotta be here on time." It wouldn't be unusual for the narcissistic parent to strike back and let's say, not to bring the child at all on the next round.

Okay, now the parent who's taking the brunt of it really has two choices. If they're in therapy, then they can sit down with the co-parenting therapist and the other parent and say, "Look, round one, child was four hours late. I told you last time. Round two, you didn't bring our child at all. So you're either going to have to sign a contract with me right now, or we are going to court."

If there's no therapist, then this spouse probably have no choice but to go to court. But yeah, you can't let it go on for a year. Because then, you know, it has a life of its own. And then the child starts experiencing him or herself as a ping pong ball.

Baer: Absolutely. And. I want to conclude by thanking you for coming on today so much. You have such extensive knowledge. And you showcase that knowledge of this particular issue, which again, is so pervasive, but you really combine that with your knowledge and understanding of this particular community, the Jewish community, the Frum community in general, and how you apply that knowledge to the unique circumstances that we unfortunately see more and more. So, thank you so much. This was such a great experience for me. I learned a lot, so I hope our listeners really learn a lot as well and take a lot away from this because you really laid it out. So, thank you. Appreciate it.

Dr. Fridman: Thank you very much. It's really been a pleasure and I appreciate the opportunity.

Baer: And of course you can find out more about me at foxrothschild.com/elianabaer, where you can also find my latest blogs. You can find me on LinkedIn at Eliana Baer and on Instagram @elianaatbaeresq.

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