As a psychology student in the late 1960s and early 1970s, nothing seemed more frustrating than having to end my involvement with a patient or a family merely because I had concluded a segment of my training. I felt that this arbitrary disruption was a disservice to patients and therapist alike. Moreover, it offended my sense of the esthetics of therapy. It seemed to me that one should treat a “case” from beginning to end—a perfect circle. This implied that, once the problem was identified, therapist and patients would strive together until the problem was resolved.

Yet another strand of my growth as a therapist had occurred in the late 1950s, long before I began the formal study of psychology. My first interest in the relation between helping people to change and perceiving their imbeddedness in their contexts developed when I was an itinerant tutor, working with children with learning problems. (For a fuller description, see Lusterman, 1990.) Working in their dining rooms, their kitchens, and the children’s bedrooms, I became aware of how these troubled children affected their families and how their families affected them. It wasn’t long before I reached out to their teachers, counselors, school principals, and other personnel. It struck me again how these children often became entwined with the adults who struggled to help them, and how these same adults had a great impact on them, for good or for bad. It wasn’t long before I attempted to convene a meeting of the horde of professionals involved with the family of Janice, one of my clients. Janice, then 15 years of age, was being seen by a psychiatrist; her mother was being seen by a social worker; and her father was being seen by a psychologist. In addition, many school personnel touched both Janice’s life and the lives of her parents. Much to my surprise, when I suggested that we all meet, everyone agreed to come. By meeting’s end, much had been communicated, including the sense that actions on the part of one professional often counteract those of another. We agreed to keep contact, in the hopes that more united action would be beneficial. We all left the meeting feeling hopeful. However, it was not long before it became clear that none of that hoped-for change was forthcoming. I became convinced that there was a need for some new process, one that took into account the way in which various systems interacted with, and sometimes impinged on, one another.

When I began my doctoral studies in the late 1960s, I expected to learn much about family development and treatment. My education as a psychologist, however, would take me far from my concerns about the treatment of families, let alone their larger contexts. My clinical professors saw family therapy as an esoteric and renegade discipline. As one professor said, 

"It's hard enough to develop the skills to deal with the dangers and complexities of treating one person. There are no meaningful parameters to contain what might happen if you tried to treat a whole family at the same time."

I felt that the best I could do would be to extrapo-
late what I was learning about the various disciplines of psychology into my growing curiosity about families. Still another issue was the attitude (almost a taboo) on the part of my professors toward the possibility that religious identity might play a role in therapy. It seemed to spring from two sources: (a) a belief that science and religion did not mix and (b) a psychoanalytic worldview that carefully shielded the person of the therapist from the patient.

Two years into my studies, however, a great shift occurred. Many university students, responding to the social unrest unleashed by the Vietnam war, began a student strike. Some of them briefly established “alternative colleges.” This provided an opportunity to study that which was “forbidden.” The group I was involved with formed a study group to learn about the “dangerous fire” of family therapy. We read whatever we could find, and we watched the early films of Ackerman and Whitaker at work. We were impressed with the dramatic presence of these early giants. Unlike the impersonal analytic stance we were learning, these therapists made no secret of their own personalities. In fact, their use of their selves was an important factor in how they worked.

While I continued my doctoral studies, I was fortunate enough to undertake a parallel training with one of the pioneering systems-oriented groups: Roosevelt Hospital’s Family Studies Program, which serves, among other districts, the Hell’s Kitchen area of New York City. It was here that I began to work with Hispanic families, many of whom were so isolated that it took months of family work in their homes before we could even entice them to come to the hospital itself. Fresh from the academic critique of the reification of the concepts of ego, id, and superego, now I found myself embroiled in a new problem: Had we not, perhaps, despite the youth of our field, begun to reify “the family” as “the system?” It was the psychologist Bunny Duhl who said, in the early 1970s, “you can’t kiss a system.” It was in the late 1960s that I was instructed “If the whole family doesn’t show for the appointment, don’t see them—wait ‘til they all come in.” I was uncomfortable with the sense that within the still-young field of family therapy a new orthodoxy was already emerging. In defining the “system” as the family, were we already somehow replicating an error that we could so easily see in more traditional approaches? This led to still more questions. What really defined a family system? If a grandparent, an uncle, a boyfriend, or a girlfriend were significant figures, were they part of the family? If only one person came, could we do “family therapy”? How did we picture the institutions and their impact on the family? Were they, too, part of the system? Were the therapist and those who observed the therapist’s work also part of the system? Finally, and very much at odds with my earlier perfectionist belief that I would see the family through, I was now coming to a very different understanding. I began to think of the therapist as a collaborator with the family—a very much less hierarchized position.

While at Roosevelt Hospital, and over the next several years, I had the opportunity to watch the masters of family therapy at work, sometimes through videotape, and sometimes at conferences, working with families “live.” There emerged from these observations an image of the therapist, with a mixture of charisma, skill, and sometimes even heroism, bringing the family from chaos to clarity, from failure to success. Beels and Ferber (1972) attempted to define “What Family Therapists Do.” There was an unspoken assumption that by system one meant “family” (however that was defined) and that by therapist one meant an individual who was either, in Beels and Ferber’s terminology, a “conductor” or a “reactor.” Both conductors and reactors were seen as experts, at the top of the treatment hierarchy. With hindsight, it is easy to say that in neither instance was the therapist yet clearly defined as part of the system; rather, the emphasis was placed on the therapist’s expertise, a position that placed him or her somewhat above the family. There was also an esthetic that seemed to accept the idea that the therapist, or in some instances the therapeutic team, would see the case from beginning to end, which seemed to confirm my earlier feelings. I found myself wondering if there were some therapeutic role that was not easily classified but that was neither conductor nor reactor. To add to my own confusion, I met the late Carolyn Atteave, who introduced me to the concept of “network therapy.”
(Speck & Atteave, 1974). Drawing on her experience as a Native American, Atteave described the power of the tribe, the members of which would all meet together to aid a member in distress, and extrapolated this to the gathering together of a family's system under the leadership of a therapist who acted as a master of ceremonies and facilitator. Still another pioneer, E. H. Auerswald (1968), described an "ecological systems approach," which dealt with the interaction of patients, their families, and the agencies that provided services to them.

Later in my career, as I met the members of the Kapulsky family, I was drawn into a re-examination of much of what I had learned. I experienced an awakening sense of a different and more modest role for the therapist, a different understanding of who constitutes the "system," and a new understanding of the role played by the therapist's self—a role that was one of neither conductor nor reactor. Finally, I learned that a sincere therapeutic interest in a family's religious journey, combined with a willingness to share carefully the therapist's own religious and spiritual issues, could be a powerful force for change.

THE KAPULSKY FAMILY

Anya Kapulsky telephoned me and explained that she had been referred by a colleague at the university where I had for many years been a teacher. My colleague had recommended me in particular because I was known as a committed Jew. Anya explained to me that this would be a most important qualification, because she had many spiritual concerns. She also told me that my colleague had described me as a family therapist. This intrigued her. Until then, she knew only of therapists who saw one person at a time. I asked whom she was particularly concerned about in her family, and she replied that she worried most about Natalya, her 13-year-old daughter, who had a long history of school difficulty and was currently expelled from school. She explained that it was particularly important to her that Natalya receive Jewish schooling but that she was very disillusioned with the various Yeshivas (Jewish Orthodox day schools) and feared that they did not have the resources to handle "this difficult child." She reported equal frustration with the various psychologists and the psychopharmacologist who had treated Natalya.

My first thought was that I felt entrapped by my colleague's ardent referral and by the intensity with which Anya described her feelings on receiving the referral. I imagined that she believed that I could be of special help because of my Jewish identity and also perhaps because I used what my colleague had described to her as this "new approach": working with the family. I envisioned myself as another in the long line of therapists who had, as Anya saw it, failed her child. Despite my trepidations. I finished this first telephone contact by making an appointment for the following week. I told her that I looked forward to meeting Anya's husband and the two children at that time. She said, "I will do my best to bring everyone." After I hung up the telephone, it occurred to me that there was something in her tone suggesting that I might meet only Anya the following week—that she still needed to check me out. I thought about calling her back and making it still clearer how important it would be to include all the family members. But something in her manner suggested that it would be wiser to let the meeting take its own course.

MEETING THE FAMILY THROUGH ANYA'S EYES

Forewarned by my hunch, it was no surprise when only Anya sat in the waiting room. She was a dark-haired woman, with a kind face that reflected years of worry, a pervasive sadness. Although it was a warm day, she wore the long skirt and long-sleeved blouse typical of Orthodox Jewish women. This garb not only symbolized the virtue of modesty but also, to the knowledgeable observer, declared her particular form of Jewish identity. She explained that the family would not be with her today. Yakov, her husband, had to work. Natalya, about whom she was consulting with me, had already seen so many therapists that Anya didn't wish to inflict another one on her unless she felt that the therapist could respect the family's needs. Because Avrum, her youngest, presented no particular problem, it seemed foolish to bring only him.
Then her tale poured out. Anya and Yakov had immigrated to the United States 15 years ago. It was a very stressful time and, toward the end of that first year, Natalya was born. She was a bright child, but even in infancy, the slightest stimulation made her very excited, and it was very hard to calm her down. A major reason for Anya’s decision to leave Russia was her strong desire to become a good Jew. Although she had little opportunity to learn in Russia, she grabbed whatever she could. Yakov, by contrast, had no particular interest in rediscovering his Judaism. Anya herself became very interested in the study of Kabbalah (a mystical aspect of Judaism).

Natalya had been an excellent student in the early grades of public school, although she was restless in class and a bit unruly. In the fifth grade, at Anya’s insistence, and with little support from Yakov, she was enrolled in a Jewish day school. By this time her behavior seemed to have deteriorated. She had difficulty organizing herself and, in Anya’s words, “got caught in her own mess.” Anya felt that from that time forward, the school had scapegoated Natalya. She saw this as a great injustice and was doubly annoyed when Natalya was referred to a therapist who, after some months of therapy, reported seeing no emotional problems.

Anya reported that one day she had become very angry and hit Natalya with a hairbrush. Natalya told this to some classmates, who told her to speak to the principal, so that Anya could be charged with abuse. Natalya’s therapist urged the principal not to call. Anya admitted that she often became very angry with Natalya, calling her bad names and sometimes hitting her. Often these outbreaks occurred when school would call to inform her of Natalya’s misbehavior. Her reaction to the calls would lead to fights with Yakov, who saw her as overconcerned with Natalya and her problems. “I know that Natalya wants a close relationship with me, and I with her. But I have a problem. I am at first very patient, but then I lose it, and I am out of control.”

Toward the end of our first meeting, I asked for permission to contact the various mental health people and schools who had been involved with Natalya. Anya readily consented but warned me that the mental health people wanted to put Natalya in public school because of the relative absence of pupil personnel services in the parochial schools. Anya was strongly opposed to this because of her religious convictions.

As we concluded, I told Anya that, for some reason, I found myself thinking about how Moses, when he arrived at the Jordan River, sent spies to spy out the Holy Land to see if it could be taken. She smiled at the analogy and admitted that, yes, in a way she had decided to “spy out the land.” I told her that I hoped that she could be one of the spies who says that the land is filled with milk and honey and that it can be taken. My next task was to contact the various people with whom Anya had already consulted in order to begin to create an ecomap for myself that included these others.

MAKING CONTACT

Therapist 1: Dr. S, a Psychiatrist
Dr. S said she felt that when Anya had called seeking help that she was in fact dumping Natalya on Dr. S’s doorstep. Dr. S believed that both Anya and Natalya were “very borderline.” Dr. S reported that Anya fluctuated between an intrusive way of intervening in Natalya’s affairs, often followed by a sudden and dramatic “dropping” of the youngster. She described Anya as the more educated and upwardly mobile of the two parents and indicated that Yakov seemed “somewhat boorish.” Yakov, according to Dr. S, takes the position that Natalya is Anya’s responsibility: “She spoiled her, and now she must straighten her out.” She also reported that Natalya had been removed from some of the schools because she was sexually provocative and that her Rorschach confirmed an unusual interest in sexuality.

Therapist 2: Dr. P, a Psychologist
Dr. P cautioned me, “I’m not a family therapist, but I know that would be the way to treat this girl. However,” he added, “although this is a family problem, it will not be possible to treat it by seeing the family together—it just won’t happen.” He also indicated that the younger brother, Avrum, is considered to be a “perfect” child. He reported that he had tried to describe to Anya her enmeshment with Natalya and how Anya excluded Yakov, despite her anger at his lack of involvement: “She just doesn’t get it.” He
diagnosed Natalya as having an oppositional disorder.

**Therapist 3: Dr. Q, a Psychologist**
Dr. Q told me that he had been referred after a hospital outpatient clinic had evaluated Natalya. The hospital team included a neurologist, a neuropsychologist, a child psychologist, a child psychiatrist, a social worker, and others. Their findings indicated that there was evidence of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) by parent report but not by school report. The hospital team saw evidence of oppositional defiant disorder. Probably the most impressive finding was a difference of 24 points between Natalya's Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children's Verbal Score and her Performance Score. The school had also asked Dr. Q to examine Natalya for possible ADHD. His belief, however, was that her primary problem was her passive-dependent relationship with her mother. He had seen Natalya and Anya together a number of times. He reported that any time he attempted an intervention Anya would discount it, because, as she said, "you don't see things through our eyes." He described Anya as a great blamer but not a good assigner of responsibility.

**The Referrer: Professor M**
I also had gained permission to speak with the referrer. She told me that she was so happy that I had "come aboard," because my Jewish religious background and my interest in problems of immigration (about which she had heard me lecture) made me ideally suited to help the family. I thanked her for the referral.

**Various School Personnel**
I spoke with a number of rabbis who had been involved with Natalya. All reported that she was a likeable but difficult child and that they felt no longer able to serve her unless she made remarkable strides in her behavior.

**MY MUDDLE**
I felt burdened as I attempted to sort out the material and ideas presented by my various predecessors.

I felt that many judgments had been made about Natalya, her "possible" ADHD, her "enmeshment" with her mother, and her precocious sexuality. I had also been warned that Anya was a "blamer" and that none of the interventions that had been attempted succeeded for more than a week or two. The previous therapists attributed these failures to Anya's tendency to undermine therapeutic interventions. As I mused about each therapist's contribution I noted that none had mentioned the issue of religion or the disruption associated with immigration. I also found myself thinking how important it would be for me to both value and yet not be overly influenced by what I had learned. Now I felt ready for the next meeting, which I hoped would include all the family members.

**MEETING THE FAMILY**
I opened the door to the waiting room to find Yakov and Anya and their two children. Natalya, a sweet faced, fairly tall 13-year-old who appeared well into adolescence, wore a short-sleeved cutoff man's shirt and blue jeans. Her 11-year-old brother Avrum wore a kippah, the traditional headcovering of Orthodox Jewish males. The father Yakov was a tall man who shifted in his chair as I came out to the waiting room, leaving me with the sense that he was none too happy to be there. I noted that he was dressed in his working clothes, coverall jeans and a paint-stained shirt. I also noticed that, unlike Avrum, he wore no head covering. It was almost as if I were seeing two families, one consisting of Anya and Avrum, who identified themselves by their garb as Orthodox Jews, and Yakov and Natalya who, by their appearance, had chosen to enter the secular world. As I introduced myself and ushered the family into my office I found myself wondering what the power of this dichotomy might be.

Anya seated herself in a comfortable easy chair, directly facing me. Avrum chose the other easy chair, closest to his mother. This left several ordinary office chairs. Yakov chose a seat one distant from his son, so that I saw him basically in profile. Choosing to leave still another seat vacant, Natalya seated herself closest to me. I asked each what they liked most about their family. Anya spoke of how
beautiful and gifted her children were, although she teared up as she sadly described how she saw Natalya as “wasting her talents.” Yakov said that he thought that Anya’s concerns about the children were a good thing but that it made him angry that that was all she ever seemed to think about. Natalya passed: “I have nothing that I can think of that’s so good about my family. Maybe I’ll think of something later.” Avrum said that it was a nice family and that people cared about each other.

I then asked what each person thought might be improved in the family’s life—what they hoped would come out of our work if we decided to work together. Anya said, “I want us to have a better life, less fighting, more spiritual life.” When I questioned this, she said, “I wish we would have a real Shabbos (the Jewish word for Sabbath)—at least one day a week when we would all be together and have some peace, no fighting.” Yakov said that all he wanted was, just like Anya, peace—no fighting. Then, looking down at the floor, he added, “But the person who makes the fights is Anya—she is always so angry at Natalya. I want the fighting to stop.” Natalya said that she was growing up, so she wanted more freedom. Then she added, softly, “What really bothers me is about Avrum. I think he’s a loser.” Avrum, ignoring his sister’s characterization of him, added, “It isn’t only my mom and sister who fight. My mom and dad fight, too. I want it to stop.”

As the session ended I commented on how important loyalty was in this family, how, in some way, they were so concerned about one another, and how important it was to find a way to stop the fighting, a wish they all shared. I asked whether they would like to make a next appointment. When Anya turned to Natalya to ask whether she would come back, Yakov gruffly countered, “Anya—this is a decision for Natalya to make? No—we should make it.” Rather than permit this struggle about the hierarchy to continue in the office, I suggested that the family make its decision and call me the next day to schedule another appointment if they wished. I felt that it would have been unwise to continue the conversation in the office, because I could think of no intervention that would not appear to side either with Yakov or with Anya. I was also impressed with how Avrum, the youngest, revealed a crucial piece of information: that it was not only his mother and sister who fought but also his mother and father. The next morning Anya called and said “We want to come back.”

NATALYA’S TWO WORLDS

As we seated ourselves, Avrum said quietly, “They’ve been fighting again.” Anya explained that Natalya was constantly borrowing money from her friends to buy all kinds of things and that she showed very poor judgment. “What kinds of things?” I inquired. “Jeans, rings, sweaters, all kinds of things.” I sensed that this was Natalya’s way of fitting in. Knowing how important the issue of Jewish identity was to Anya, I felt it would be premature to explore Natalya’s “borrowing” as a way of costuming herself for the secular, “American” world. My fear was that this would only intensify the differences between Yakov and Anya. Instead, I asked Yakov what he thought about Anya’s concern. I was pleasantly surprised to hear him agree: “No, it isn’t right that she borrows like this. How can she ever pay it back?” Natalya retorted, “I have some money from them right now, and I’ll do with it as I please. It’s my money.” Anya then began to beg Natalya to return the money. Yakov turned to me and said, “You see, this is what makes me crazy. She begs her. Then Natalya won’t do it, and then things get very bad between them.” Turning to Natalya he said, “If you don’t give them back the money, I will find it, and I will keep it. You will have no money, and no new stuff.” I commented that it was good to see Anya and Yakov agreeing on their goal, if not their method, although it must be hard for Natalya, because they were agreeing against her. Natalya sat quietly. As the session ended, I commented that I hoped a way could be found for Anya and Yakov together to help Natalya to return the borrowed money.

As they left, Natalya turned to me and said, “Nat—it’s Nat—my friends don’t call me Natalya.” I found myself thinking, “So, she’s telling me that maybe I should have gotten into the significance of her money as a way of becoming more like her friends.” But I heard other echoes also—did Natalya want me to side with her being more “American”
and less like her mother? Should I call her "Nat?" I felt quite torn. The issue of living in two worlds was important to me. As a strongly identified Jew living mostly in the United States but sometimes in Israel, I could understand Anya's need to hold "Nat" close to Jewish traditions of which she had been so deprived in Russia. From the day Anya arrived in the United States, she had struggled so hard to right this wrong. Her identity as a Jew, living now in a free country, was of paramount importance to her.

I could also empathize with Natalya's fierce need to fit in with her peers. This touched on still another struggle within me as I approached Anya. As much as I admired her attempt to regain her roots, I felt equally uncomfortable with her fascination with the Kabbalah, which the tradition sees as a mystical byway, far from normative Judaism. Could I respectfully accept where Anya was in her own struggle to define her identity? Could I be respectful of the path that Nat's apparent rebellion was taking—at least for now, to distance herself from Jewish education and Jewish life? Would my own predilections stand in the way? What of this should I share—and when, and with whom?

As I pondered these questions I found myself drawn to still another aspect of my personal belief system: a long-standing interest in Taoism. Although I am by no means a Taoist, I have for many years incorporated elements of Taoist thinking into my own values system. I found myself musing on how these beliefs might help me as I began to feel ever more at sea with the Kapulsky family. Briefly, the Tao is the Chinese word for path, or way. Watts (1975) describes the Tao as "the course, the flow, the drift, or the process of nature" (p. 41). One author says that the Tao may be best described as "the way the universe works." To understand the Tao one must abandon the Western notion that passivity and activity are opposites. Taoism prescribes a kind of inactivity, but its purpose is to help the Taoist to find his or her place in the flow of the universe. The expression "go with the flow," in this context, reminds us the Taoist does not so much seek the "way" but becomes sufficiently in the flow that the way emerges. I was becoming ever more aware that any attempt that I made to direct this diverse family, in the midst of its own growth, was doomed to fail.

I could be neither conductor nor reactor. Only "being" with them, finding their "flow," would permit me to be of some help.

THE POLICE ARE CALLED

It was not long before my acceptance of the Tao was put to the test. As I was closing up my office late one evening, I received a telephone call from a neighbor. She told me that she felt that, as a policewoman, she must ask me if the family that she saw getting into their car at a certain time that evening were my patients. I asked her why, and she replied,

I had to intervene in a fight that the mother and the daughter were having. I saw the mother strike the daughter several times, quite hard, to the point that the young woman was pushed backwards. I took their names, asked them what they were doing in the neighborhood, and explained to the mother that it was my duty to report what I had observed to child protective services.

I was not surprised when Anya came alone to the following session. This permitted me to share with her my neighbor's report. "But," said Anya, "I came today alone to talk about the fight I had with Yakov. It came to blows, and I called the police." Then, out poured her own feelings of responsibility for the many acts of violence that had punctuated their marriage—violence involving Natalya and sometimes violence against Yakov. I told her that I had no alternative but to join with the policewoman in making my own report to child protective services (CPS). Anya told me that she felt somehow comforted, knowing that she would have to reveal to someone else this part of herself, which caused her such shame. Like many therapists, I had felt very threatened at the possibility that my role as therapist would be usurped by CPS and that perhaps my patient would be so angry that she herself would remove the family from therapy. Instead, Anya was reassuring me that perhaps this might help.

I explored Anya's belief that she had so little power in the family. She said that when she reached
the point where she felt a desperate need to reach Natalya or Yakov and no words seemed to touch them she would resort to slapping. I told her that it was hard for me to see her as having so little power. She had come to a new country; mastered a new language; and was struggling, with some success, to find her own Jewish identity. Furthermore, she was creating a family environment in which Jewish identity could be explored and fought over. “These are no small accomplishments,” I added.

“This may be so, but I feel that I am doing it alone,” Anya replied.

I know that Yakov is as concerned about Natalya’s behavior as I am, but it’s like he sits back, he doesn’t say anything to me about it, or to her. So I always look like the bad one. He just seems to go on, like it was nothing. I get so angry at him, but I can’t get him to hear me. Except sometimes when we fight. But even then, he says I started it, and in the end, I feel like the fool. Yet I am trying to make a Jewish home. Nothing is more important to me. But Yakov seems to do everything he can to undermine it. All he thinks about is success, work, money.

I suggested to Anya that she share her belief about Yakov’s concern for Natalya with him and that she invite him to accompany her to the following session so that they could decide how best to care for Natalya in a manner on which they could both agree. It was most important, I told her, to begin by finding out what common ground they shared—in this case, their mutual worries. Only then, I said, would it be safe to talk about their differences. “Would you telephone him to invite him?” she asked. I replied that if she wanted him there, I believed that he would come.

MEETING WITH THE “EXECUTIVE TEAM”

“Since I have seen you only a few times, certainly fewer than Anya, I would appreciate it, Yakov, if you would tell me how you see things,” I began. Yakov replied that he and Anya had many differences, some about Natalya and some about, as he said, “just the way we see things.” “Anya,” he continued, worries about almost everything. It can be that I am not home exactly when Sabbath begins. It can be that she thinks that all I care about is work and money. It can be the littlest thing, like how Natalya dresses. I never know what will upset her next. And then, she gets very, very angry. Sometimes she is shouting, crying. Sometimes she is hitting. I believe in live and let live. I try to keep things calm, and let things go.

Anya sat quietly, eyes fixed on Yakov, listening attentively. I asked her how she felt about Yakov’s description. “It is not untrue,” she replied. I do get very angry. But Yakov, I feel so alone. I am so angry because you don’t seem to see the things that are wrong. I feel like everything rests on my shoulders. If I try to tell you something is bothering me, you tell me it is nothing.

Yakov replied, “I’m just trying to calm you down.” “Yakov, do you think it’s working?” I asked.

Yakov shook his head. “You know,” he said, to listen to Anya, you would think I don’t also try to help. For instance, if Natalya refuses to go on the school bus, I will wait and take her with me in the car in the morning. I do many things.

I wondered if either Anya or Yakov felt that what they were doing was working. For example, were they experiencing any great success in controlling Natalya’s behavior? Both agreed that nothing was working. I wondered aloud what it must be like for Natalya, seeing how much her mother and father disagreed. “But we don’t really disagree,” Yakov interjected. “Maybe the way we try to get her to do things is different.”

“So what is the effect?” I mused. “I think we are canceling each other out,” observed Anya, as Yakov nodded in agreement.

I asked what they could both agree on. Yakov
replied that he couldn’t bear the terrible way that Natalya spoke to her mother, even using words like “bitch.” He explained that, when he heard Natalya using such language he would take her aside and tell her it was a bad thing to do. Then Natalya would explain how bad her mother was making her feel, and he would tell Natalya that, even so, Natalya had to respect Anya. Anya said that she was surprised to hear that Yakov defended her, but still, maybe what Natalya got from that sort of exchange was the idea that Yakov was saying “Even if your mother is crazy, you still have to talk to her properly.” Yakov also admitted, with a bit of pushing from me, that he was not always so happy with the way Natalya spoke to him or her brother either.

“So one thing you both agree on is that you want her to speak respectfully,” I observed. I asked if they would be willing to learn some simple principles of psychology that could help them to change Natalya’s behavior, adding with a smile that it would, of course, change theirs as well. We talked about very simple ideas, particularly about reinforcement and extinction. I described what a “time out” was and indicated that it was important that they understand that it was a time out for everyone, a chance to start over in a more positive way. They wanted to know how they could apply that to their daughter. Now, I thought to myself, they are thinking as a team, not competing, as they had before, about who was to blame. We agreed that their goal should be simple and easy to accomplish so that everyone could feel encouraged. They decided that the change for which they would work at first would be respectful speaking; Natalya’s cursing and nasty tone would no longer be acceptable. I told them that I had forgotten one other important principle: modeling. If they wanted change in her communication, they would have to communicate with each other in a new way and with Natalya as well. Yakov and Anya agreed that they would tell Natalya that they were all going to work on this and that although they expected her to have trouble with it at first, she could talk to them about anything she wished to as long as she found respectful words. They were then to praise her warmly for improved communication. I suggested that all family members attend the next session so that I could observe how they were applying their new ideas.

A FAMILY MEETING

As the next meeting opened, Natalya sat between her mother and father, and Avrum was at his father’s side. Natalya opened the session saying, “My mother and I were just talking at home about a sad thing.” I was surprised to hear that Yakov defended her, but...

When Natalya was a little girl, I went to work, and my mother, who lived with us, took care of her, and also of Avrum, when he was very little. When Natalya was just entering fourth grade, my mother died, very suddenly. This was a terrible shock to Natalya, and this was when she began to have so much trouble in school. I tried to explain this to the teacher, but no one really listened. Up 'til then, everyone said that she was a good and a smart girl.

I turned to Natalya to ask her to tell me what she remembered of her grandmother. As I began to speak, I noticed that she was wiping away tears. As her mother stroked her hand, I commented, “So we know that you are a sensitive young woman, and the things that happen around you affect you very much.”

“This is true,” said Yakov.

When there is fighting, if I am angry with Anya, or if she is scolding Avrum, this is when she is at her worst. Maybe you are right. Maybe it is because she feels so much. But we are all trying now, and none of us is getting as angry.

Avrum then added, “But don’t think she is such an angel—just the other day she did something bad—she took money from me so that she could pay back some of what she owed one of her friends.” I found myself thinking back to what I had learned about homeostasis. As I was considering some way of addressing this, Yakov turned to Avrum and said sternly, “Didn’t we sit down with you to say that we didn’t want you to tell on Natalya any more? Don’t do it.” Anya added, “Maybe we have misled you,
Avrum, but we don’t want you to be a detective any more.”

The following sessions continued to focus on the increased teamwork between Anya and Yakov. Some crises arose, mostly around school problems. The difference now was that the old alliances were broken. Avrum seemed more comfortable with his father, despite their differences about religion. Natalya, although still far from well behaved, was more responsive to her parents’ concerns.

CPS CALLS
I received a call from CPS. The worker indicated that there was not enough evidence for a “finding” but that she thought on the basis of what the family had told her that family therapy should continue. I told her that I would reserve the right to contact her if I felt that the situation became volatile again, and I discussed this with Anya and Yakov, who told me that the one thing they were sure of was that there would be no more violence. Both agreed that it was so much easier to know that they could talk out what was bothering them and especially that they could do this with Natalya.

ANYA AND YAKOV
The summer was now approaching. Anya and Yakov knew that I would be away for almost 2 months. They called, indicating that they needed to see me alone, without the children. When they arrived, Anya was silent and tearful, and Yakov spoke gruffly. “I don’t know what else I can do,” he said.

I am working so hard, to be better at home and to continue to make a living. But I still feel that Anya is always judging me. There is no appreciation. I can’t go on this way. What is the point of all this?

Anya said, “It isn’t about the children any more. It is about us. Maybe it always was. We came to you again, because you helped us with Natalya. Now you must help us.”

“All I can do is to help you to look at what change would mean in your marriage,” I said. “But it is dangerous. You may end up with a better marriage, but you may also be looking at a decent di-

orce. What are the issues?” They began to list them:

- Yakov was bothered by Anya’s increasing religiosity. She was not like this when they first married.
- Anya was concerned about Yakov’s constant preoccupation with his work and his need to become a great financial success.
- Yakov felt that Anya had no interest in sex, even though she did not refuse him outright.
- Anya felt that Yakov showed little affection for her, so that she was always asking herself, “Does he really stay with me because he loves me, or just because we are married?”

There were only two sessions remaining. In these, we began by talking about Anya’s increased interest in living a full Jewish life. Yakov was aware of my background and Jewish identification because he knew of my contacts with the various Jewish schools with which Natalya had been involved. At one point he asked me if I felt that there was anything “abnormal” about Anya’s concern with Jewish life. I asked him if he minded if I spoke personally, as my self even more than as a therapist. He agreed. With his permission, I spoke of how Judaism had always been a search for me, a constantly evolving part of my life. I told him that I myself had come from a home where one parent had a strong Jewish identity and the other had very little. I told them that I had found that in my own home, the rituals that we followed, especially those concerning the Sabbath, had provided us with at least one day a week that was guaranteed to increase family closeness. “So you do not think that her interest is out of line?” he asked. “On the contrary,” I replied, “I think it is part of her attempt to regain what she felt was stolen from her in Russia.” Yakov thanked me for my honesty. I suggested that they continue this conversation at home, thinking not about pathology but about what they could both agree on right now, as two Jewish parents.

In the final session we once again focused on what kind of life Yakov and Anya wanted to have together. They did not return to the Jewish issue but instead talked about their emotional relationship and how tried it had been by so many things. They spoke about the stress of immigrating and of the
pressures that they suffered with the loss of Anya’s mother, who had been a great help with the children. They shared their mutual pain about the problems they had encountered with Natalya and how their different approaches had made each feel so alone as they dealt with her many crises. I told them that I felt badly about leaving at such an important point in our work but that I would be returning at summer’s end and that they should be free to call. Of course, I also left the name of my covering doctor in the event that there was an emergency.

EPILOGUE

I returned at summer’s end, expecting a call from the Kapulskys, but heard nothing. I wondered whether this meant that things were going well or that they had gone badly and they sought another therapist. When I checked with my associate, I was relieved to find that there had been no call to him either. It left me with the hope that things were going well. I was tempted to call but felt that it would be experienced by them as a pressure to return to therapy.

A year had passed since the Kapulskys had ended therapy. I was preparing to write a chapter for this volume. I spoke with Anya, explaining to her that I would be writing a chapter that would include my work with her and her family and asking her how the family was doing.

She began by speaking about the changes she saw in Yakov as a parent. “When I first met you,” she said,

I never thought that Yakov would really come to therapy. Somehow, you made it easier for me to get him to come. I think this broke the ice for him. I think it made him really begin to think about human relationships. He opened up and looked at his role in the problems our family was having, instead of just seeing everything as my fault. Even if I pushed him away because I felt that I knew better, after therapy he would challenge me in a better way, and then take a more effective role himself. This took some of the pressure off of me.

Then she spoke of changes in the marriage:

It took awhile, but we finally realized we had to look closely at our relationship as husband and wife. I think that seeing how we cooperated better with the children made it seem possible that we could change our marriage as well. Remember you used to ask us to rate things, 1 to 10? Now the marriage is between a 7 and a 9. When we started, it felt like it was a 1 or a 2.

Concerning Natalya, she reported,

Natalya is now a 5 or 6. Her choice of friends is much healthier, and she is a much better friend. Sometimes her judgment is still not so good. She will still blow up sometimes, but I can stop myself if I feel that I am going to overreact. Often I wait until I can talk it over with Yakov if there is a problem, and he will take a role. This is such a nice change. Another important thing is that I think, underneath it all, she respects me for taking strong moral stands. Yakov and I have also been thinking a lot about all the talk about her having an attention problem (ADHD). We think that isn’t true, and that’s why therapy for that won’t help. Yakov and I feel that we have the resources, as a family, to help her to improve. She is now having home tutoring and seems to be learning very much better. Avrum still does not have a very good relationship with her and sometimes still tries to tattle. We punish him for that, and it is happening less and less.

“There is a big change in our religious life,” she continued.

We are now Sabbath observers, all of us, and it comes from both me and Yakov. We can see the kids growing in their Jewish identity. You know, I came from next to
nothing, everything was so hard, even to get a bit of matzo for Passover, and education was not available—but at least we knew we had a Jewish identity. For Yakov, it was even less. I respect him so much more now. He is a better man. Or maybe it is that I understand him better too, and I have changed.

“We wanted to tell you more about Natalya,” she continued.

I realized that I was trying to push Judaism and Jewish education down her throat, and that this was making it poison for her. I realize now that she needs to learn for herself. All we can do is provide a good home. Even the protective service (CPS)—I am glad that you pushed this. It was very painful at the time, but it was a kind of alarm bell. We are a different kind of family now, a better family. There is a new respect.

“I want to say a little about the therapy,” she concluded.

It is more than a year now, and we have had no more therapy, not for us, and not for Natalya. We learned that we could do much by ourselves, just as a good husband and wife, and as good parents. We learned that we can work with the school and the synagogue as partners, not as if they were the bosses, and we were just there to listen to what they said. Most important, because you let us know who you were and reached out to us, to the school, to the other doctors, it helped a lot. We learned that therapy is a relationship of soul to soul.

As I pondered Anya’s words, I found myself thinking about what I had learned from the Kapulsky family: There is no finished, perfect case. I was there to walk a piece of this family’s journey with them. So many issues were touched: gender, immigration, ethnicity, religion, and how a family can find its own voice among the many other systems with which it must interact. With each issue, I realized, the outcome was unpredictable. The family continued its own development, long beyond therapy’s end, still defining and redefining itself. I also learned that, to whatever degree I had touched the Kapulsky family, so too had they touched me.

References


