

THE BROTHERS' HOUSE

Jonny lives in the family house, while David lives abroad. Is it okay for David to criticize what Jonny does with their house?

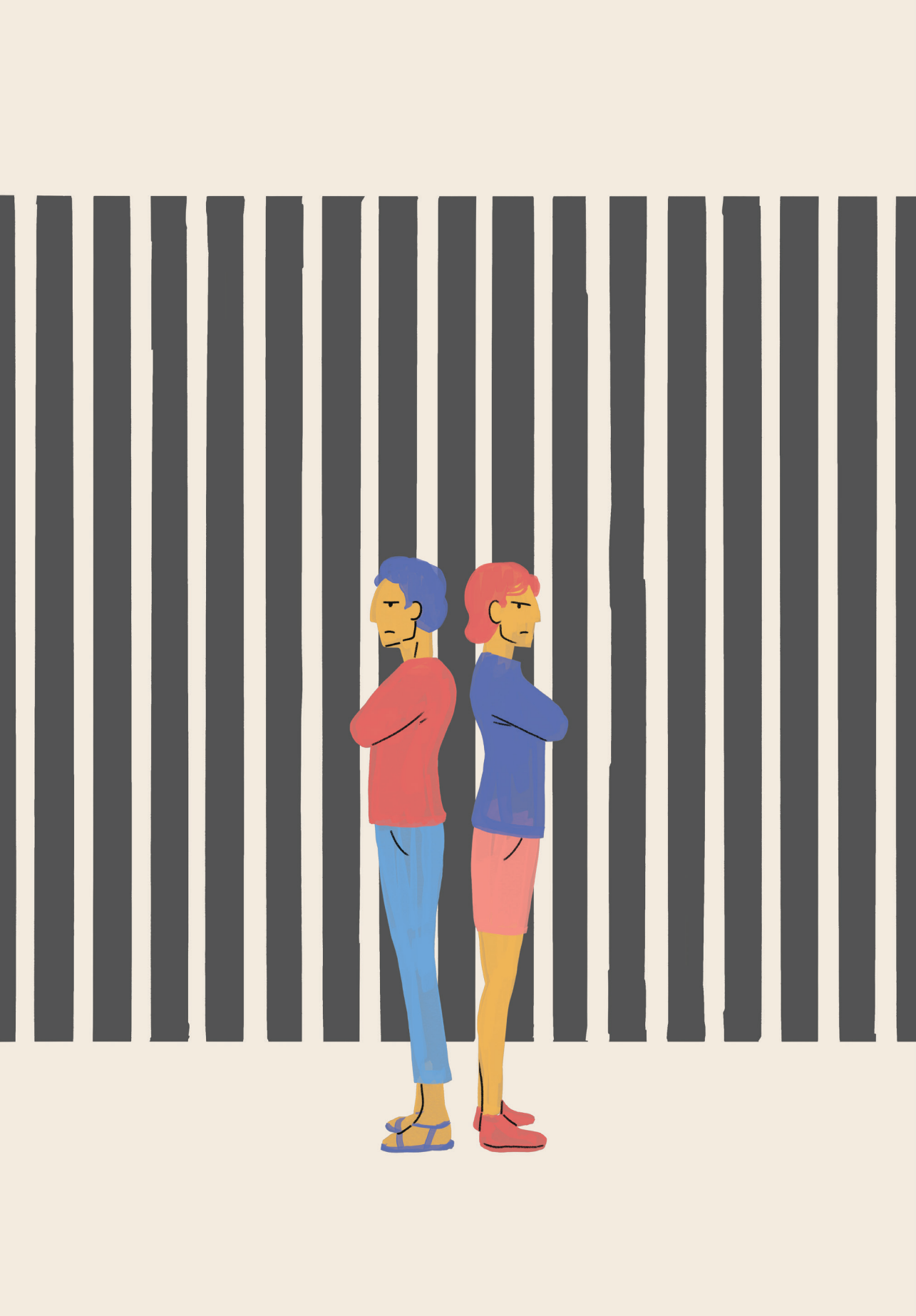
ALLEGORY

Once upon a time there were two brothers, Jonny and David. As children they loved playing in their family home. Time passed, as time does, and the boys grew up. Their parents aged, and eventually the time came for the boys to bury their father, and then some years later, their mother.

David got a job abroad. The brothers agreed that Jonny would live in their family home, and would always keep David's room available for his occasional visits. In the meantime Jonny kept up the house, fixing things that needed fixing, dealing with things that needed to be dealt with, while David would send money to cover his half of the costs.

One day, many years later, David came for a visit. Jonny was delighted. Together the two of them opened up David's room and cleared away the cobwebs. They were together again in their home, if only for a short time.

But things had changed. Since David's last visit, Jonny had become more religiously observant, and now the whole kitchen had separate areas for meat and milk. There were two ovens, two sinks, and different cutlery and plates for each of them. David didn't have a problem with religion per se, but it was kind of irritating having to suddenly be careful about what food he brought into what was, after all, his house.



More troubling was the garden outside. It had once been an open, grassy area that all the neighborhood houses backed up to. All the kids would play together in its weeds and puddles. But now the garden was a beautiful green lawn, trimmed and carefully cultivated with flowers around the edges, all completely fenced in.

“What’s the fence for?” wailed David when he first saw it. “It was so wonderful when everything was open to all the neighbors!”

“Yes,” acknowledged Jonny, “but the neighbors are different now. I know we were friends with them when we were kids, but it’s their children who live there now, and they are monsters. There’ve been break-ins and vandalism. There was no choice but to put up the fences. And besides,” he said, gesturing proudly, “isn’t it beautiful now?”

David grunted.

“What is your problem?” shouted Jonny. “You’ve been away for years while I’ve dealt with everything in this house. What right do you have to criticize?”

“Because it’s my house too!”

“But I live here. All the time! You don’t like the way I do things here? Come back and move in permanently. Then we can talk about ‘our’ house!”

“The more time I spend in ‘your’ house, the less I want anything to do with it,” shot back David.

The huge argument had only just begun.



GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Is David wrong to criticize Jonny when he does not even live in the house?
 - Should Jonny allow David to veto the changes he wants to make to the house?
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BACKGROUND

This story can be understood as an allegory for the relationship between the Jews around the world and Israeli Jewry. It was inspired by Rabbi Shira Koch Epstein, who wanted to explain how she understood the relationship between Jews in the Diaspora and Jews in Israel. She described the relationship as one of siblings who have inherited their parents' house. The story is an allegorical expansion of that image.

In this narrative, we can imagine Jonny as representing Israeli Jews living in the shared “house” of Israel, and David as representing Diaspora Jewry living abroad. The Israeli Jonny is involved in the day-to-day upkeep of a house that he perceives to be located in an increasingly problematic neighborhood. The Diasporic David gives support from a distance, and occasionally visits.

Tensions arise between the “siblings” over three key areas:

- Mostly non-Orthodox Diaspora Jewry perceives Israel to be more and more religiously Orthodox, and feels uncomfortable with what it sees to be uncompromising attitudes toward the non-Orthodox. Clashes over women’s prayer at the Kotel and conversion laws are the largest symbols of this discomfort.
- Mostly left-leaning Diaspora Jewry tends to disapprove of the way in which Israel relates to its Palestinian neighbors.
- Diaspora Jewry can express frustration at the way in which Israel makes alterations to the nature of the state without consulting or communicating with Diaspora Jewry.

For their part, many Israelis can be confounded and even insulted by Diaspora-born progressive forms of Judaism. What they see as life-and-death responses to dangerous “neighbors” are not respected by their distant and secure “siblings.” And while Israelis constantly maintain the open invitation of immediate immigration (through the Law of Return) to their Diaspora family, they often feel their siblings prefer to criticize from a distance.

How does the story read to you now, with this interpretation in your mind?



QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- Do Diaspora Jews sometimes feel that Israeli actions affect the way others relate to them personally? And does that give them more right to criticize?
 - What are the rights and obligations of Diaspora Jews? Should they be allowed a vote in Israeli elections? Should they serve in the Israeli army?
 - Should Israel consult with the Diaspora on issues that impact them?
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THOUGHTS TO RETURN TO AFTER A NIGHT'S SLEEP

- 1 I wish I'd said ...
- 2 That idea I rejected, now that I think about it ...
- 3 That whole conversation reminded me of ...