

Unhappy Homes

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Jewish homes are many things: places of celebration, education, comfort, and sustenance. But we would be remiss to mythologize the Jewish home, or to suggest that all spaces that Jews inhabit are characterized by an atmosphere of joy or security. Our kitchens are full of delicious food but we also have daughters who starve themselves, or struggle with other kinds of disordered eating. Our dining rooms host celebratory meals that flow with wine while some of our uncles fight substance abuse in secret, ashamed to bring their truths to the table. Our bedrooms are places of powerful intimacy but also sites of physical and emotional abuse — including the tragedy of incest. We are flawed, complicated, and messy people; why should the homes that shelter us be any different?

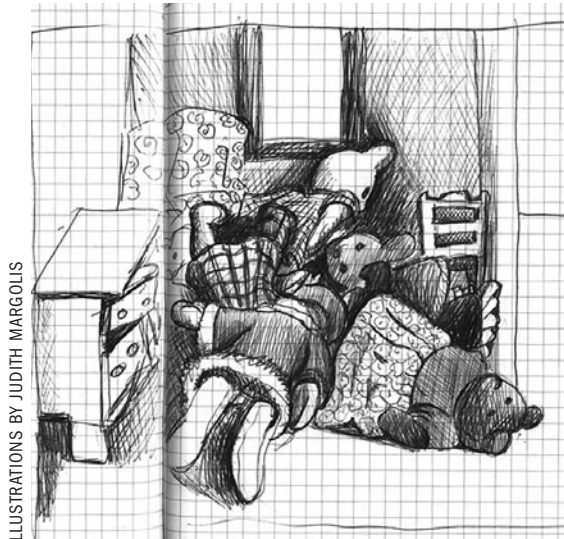
This is not easy to write about. As a nation of wanderers, the idea of home has captured our imagination, informed our theology, politics, and artistic expressions. We are a people whose ancestors literally built a home for God in the form of the first and second Temples; indeed, our holy place might have been the world's most perfect home. And then that home was violently destroyed and we found ourselves redefining the place where God lived, learning to

foundational myths — are of great and profound importance. Indeed, much of our religious genius can be found in our textual narratives of loss and longing, renewal and redemption. But we cannot get so caught up in mythic ideals that we fail to acknowledge that the “Jewish home” is millions of Jewish *homes*, each filled with their unique joys, sorrows, and afflictions.

In fact, it is the particular distinctiveness of our delights and difficulties that will inform the texture of what we add to the ongoing saga of the Jewish people. Though painful, if we are honest about our Jewish homes, if we tell the truths about our imperfections and our struggles, we will not endanger the sacred and compelling narrative of our people but rather enliven that story; we'll keep it fresh and real, not idealized and frozen by nostalgic longings for something that might have never been. Because the truth is, of course, that Jewish

homes were never perfect. There was strife in Abraham's tent, violence in the house of David; the Talmud is full of stories of domestic strife. If we acknowledge this, it might help illuminate the pain, suffering, and ugliness that can be hidden in our own homes. Shining a light on these dark corners brings every part of the Jewish home into our conversation; it recognizes the complexity in and the differences between our many Jewish houses.

This is an invitation for all of us to think expansively and critically. If we face the notion that anguish and trauma are in the air that some of us breathe at home, we can more honestly embrace the fullness of what home is. We can pour the wine, eat the food, and retreat to the bedroom knowing that we are not perfect; we are messy and real. And in that fact, we can find the joy and security for which the “Jewish home” is rightfully known.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JUDITH MARGOLIS

live as a people without a land to call our home. So perhaps it is not surprising that we have such high expectations of the contemporary Jewish home — encompassed as it is by millennia of hopes, fears, and iconic images.

The stories we Jews tell ourselves — our

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