



MY HOUSE WOULD BE DIFFERENT

Goldie Grossbaum

"I CAN ONLY SLEEP WITH THE DOOR OPEN. IF YOU CLOSE IT I'M NEVER GOING TO FALL ASLEEP!"

"I CAN'T FALL ASLEEP IF THE DOOR IS OPEN. I'M SO TIRED! I NEED THE DOOR CLOSED!"

"NO, IT HAS TO BE OPEN!"

"I FINALLY GOT USED TO IT CLOSED!"

"NO, IT NEEDS TO BE OPEN!"

"NO, IT NEEDS TO BE CLOSED! THE WHOLE WAY!"

"IT'S TOO DARK!"

"IT'S TOO LIGHT!"

I TOOK A DEEP BREATH. I was done for the day.

Bedtime can do that to you.

They had all brushed their teeth nicely as I watched proudly, until my four-year-old made sure to autograph the mirror with the toothpaste. Something about the push down tab of the Aqua Fresh just begs for it...

Three-year-old had done his ritual of stepping into four-year-old's negel vasser, and I made a mental note to email the French Twins and tell them I don't appreciate their sense of humor.

"I need the door closed now!!"

I needed to get involved. My two big boys, six and nine years old, were not going to figure this one out. And I needed them to go to sleep now!

I marched upstairs to their room, not quite sure how to resolve it. All I knew was that I was low on patience.

Who cares about the door? Just close your eyes and you won't see if it's open or closed! Stop driving each other crazy! You both woke up at six today and you need to go to sleep now! The next one to say a word will sleep on the couch tonight!

But I caught myself just before I launched into my mommy rhetoric.

I had a flashback. My two sisters and I. We shared a room and we loved it. And we fought about the door. One wanted it wide open, one wanted it closed and I wanted it 3/4 closed. Not halfway, it had to be 3/4, and I had a special way to measure. And we argued. And we debated. For many, many nights. And despite all that, we are best friends.

I looked at my boys in amusement,

still arguing about the door. *How did they know that's what you're supposed to argue about? Did they get the memo, bedtime rule #712: Argue about the door until mom comes. Then continue arguing.*

This wasn't about them. This wasn't about deliberately pushing my patience.

This was about the joys of siblings sharing a room.

It's part of the growing experience. Part of the excitement of whispering at night to each other when you're supposed to be sleeping, of waking up early and talking until it's time to get out of bed. Of staring up at the ceiling and sharing your dreams of the night before.

It's all part of the joy of having siblings. And I didn't want to steal it away from them.

So I used every last ounce of non-existent energy to rationally resolve the issue.

And we came to a compromise. They were both happy. And so was I. Not because I came up with a clever solution, but because I had the presence of mind to see past the door.

I walked back downstairs, knowing full well that tomorrow night they'd have the same disagreement. And the next night. And the next. Just like I had done.

And I repeated to myself over and over again.

It's not them. They are doing nothing wrong.

It's not the door.

It's part of the childhood experience. Part of the learning to share and care for each other. Just like my sisters and me.

In that context, I can hold on to my patience a few moments longer when I'm called in to referee.

I could hear them talking and laughing, making plans for the next day.

And I was relieved that I had caught myself in time.

MY HOUSE WOULD BE DIFFERENT

I had it all worked out. My house would be different. I eyed my new dinette set. I had carefully chosen the color pattern for the chairs; the greys and blues blended so softly. The texture was right, and it was easy to wipe clean too. The table matched so well, all carefully chosen for my new home.

And I vowed that my house would be different; in my house, kids would not color on the chairs. Or tables. Ever.

I'd make sure!

Baby number one arrives. All pens, markers and writing utensils are hidden, stowed in high cabinets. He turns one year old. I smile smugly. *See, the chairs are still clean!*

No pen is ever left in sight.

Little sister arrives. Then little brother. I'm smiling smugly. My table and chairs are still scribble free!

Little brother. Little brother. The house is filling up. So are the toy bins. And markers and pens are nowhere to be seen.

I'm chatting with one of my friends. Her kids love to draw. And I stop and think.

Do my kids love to draw?

Yeah, of course.

Um, I think so.

Well, I don't really know, because... well, because every pen and marker is out of sight!

And suddenly my plans don't sit so well. My house can be different. At the price of depriving my kids of their creativity.

Or my house can be the same as everyone else's. At the price

of my kids experiencing the joys of coloring. And accepting that they *will* scribble on my table and chairs.

I take down a few markers. The light-colored ones. A few papers. I carefully watch as they color and quickly collect the markers after. The table and chairs are still scribble free.

I have a small coloring table. That's where we color.

But who am I fooling. They need to color. They want to draw. They need more space.

And I can't get anything done, because I am busy playing policeman to the markers!

And I break my promise.

I buy a 100+ marker set. All sizes and colors. I buy a case of construction paper. I designate a drawer in my kitchen for colored paper, and I refill it constantly. My dinette table is drawing headquarters.

And they draw. And draw. To their hearts' content.

They draw pictures of me. They draw pictures of their father. They draw pictures of their siblings. They draw pictures of places we went and people we met. They draw things I can't identify.

I get a glimpse into their little minds, into how they view what goes on in our house. How they view me. How they view each other.

They play Hangman and Tic Tac Toe. They make word searches and mazes.

The table is always full of construction paper. The floor is scattered with markers.

And this morning, as my three-year-old carefully explains to me every detail of his picture that looks to me like a line with two dots, I have no regrets.

And my carefully selected dinette chairs? Well, they have some markings.

And my table? It has seen many scribbles. Some come off, some don't.

And even the walls have seen a scribble or two. Or three.

My house is not different after all.

But I learned my lesson. Kids can't thrive if they are not given the opportunity.

It was well worth the price.

MY KIDS FIGHT. DO YOURS?

"Fight? Why would my kids fight? No, they don't fight."

Oh.

I kind of half smiled, sure it was a joke.

It wasn't.

I was catching up with an old friend, a rare occasion considering where I live.

And like all good moms who catch up, we inevitably were talking about our kids.

And my comment about kids fighting obviously didn't resonate with my dear friend.

It was a light comment, a mix of mommy frustration and some humor. Nothing major, the type of thing moms groan about

good-naturedly and move on. The type where all you are looking for is a friendly "*Oh, yeah, I know what you mean!*"

But apparently, her kids don't fight.

And my kids do.

They fight. They argue. They take things away from each other. They yell at each other. They tattle on each other. They even call each other names.

And just when things are heated and I finally intervene and send them to two far opposite corners of the house indefinitely, they put up a fuss that they want to play together!

Huh? Did I miss something? You guys were fighting! Remember, he wasn't nice to you! What's going on?

But they really *do* play so nicely together. They share their stuff with each other. They make wish lists together. They make plays together. They compliment each other. They cover for each other. They read books to each other.

And I know they love each other. Only they express it differently at different times. Not always the way *I* would express it.

And on the rare occasion one isn't home, the others kind of hang around, waiting for their missing sibling

to return. They don't want to start anything without everyone there.

But they do fight. And my friend's kids don't.

And then it struck me.

We're all moms; we have a lot in common, but we sure have a lot of differences. Our kids are *not* all the same. Our schedules are *not* the same. Our stresses are *not* the same.

I thought about my life.

Given my homeschooling system, my kids are together 24/7.

Every day and every night.

They don't each go off to their own classes each day, not seeing each other from 9-4.

They sit in the same room together even during school time. They have lunch together. They have recess together. They have snack together. They are *always* together. They love it. And they have lots of opportunity to fight, too.

And my friend's kids – they are away from each other from 8-5, and finally spend some time together from dinner to bedtime. Less hours, less fighting opportunity?

Either way, I learned an important lesson.

First, I established Mommy Survival Rule #3,721: *Stop and think before starting a conversation with a fellow mom.*



Think: Is this a good topic? Do I want validation or a different opinion? And if there's a chance I won't get what I need from the conversation, then switch topics before starting!

Don't assume we all have the same approach! Don't assume our kids are all the same!

And then I made a commitment.

A commitment to all my fellow moms out there: *Before answering a question about kids, I will give a quick thought as to why the mom is asking it.*

If she wants validation, I will find a way to give it! If she wants a different opinion, I'll give it!

But I will not answer on a whim. It's not always necessary to answer with what my kids do.

Like a recent conversation I had.

"My son is three, and he refuses to be toilet trained!"

Instinctive reaction: *"Really? My kids were all toilet trained by two!" (Pat on the back, supermom!)*

After a moment's thought: *"I've heard of lots of kids who aren't toilet trained till after three!"*

And if your kids don't fight, well then, this post is not for you. ■

Goldie Grossbaum and her husband, Rabbi Yossi Grossbaum, are the directors of Chabad of Folsom, California, and homeschooling parents of six children. To read more of Goldie Grossbaum, check out littleyellownotepad.com. Or better yet, renew your subscription to the N'shei Chabad Newsletter.

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