

INSIDE OUR JEWISH ADVICE COLUMN

# A Bintel Brief

with Beth Harpaz



*Jodi Rudoren has spent the past couple of days in Boston meeting with Forward members who make our journalism possible. So instead of her 'Looking Forward' column, this week we go behind the scenes of our signature advice column.*

*The Forward's A Bintel Brief column has been answering questions from a Jewish perspective since 1906. Catch up on our advice for coping with ex-boyfriends, noisy neighbors, a death in the family, a wild child and a coworker's unruly hair — and let us know what you think.*

*In this newsletter, we take you behind the advice-column curtain and share some Bintel history. Got a problem you need help with? Email us or use this form — anonymity guaranteed.*



I'm Beth Harpaz, a senior reporter here at the *Forward*, and the latest steward of our signature advice column, A Bintel Brief. Along with a few colleagues, I've been answering your questions about love, family, work, religion and daily life. Like most advice columnists, we're not trained counselors. Instead, we use common sense, life experience, a *bisel* research and a lot of empathy to give the kind of honest advice

you'd get from a trusted, caring friend.

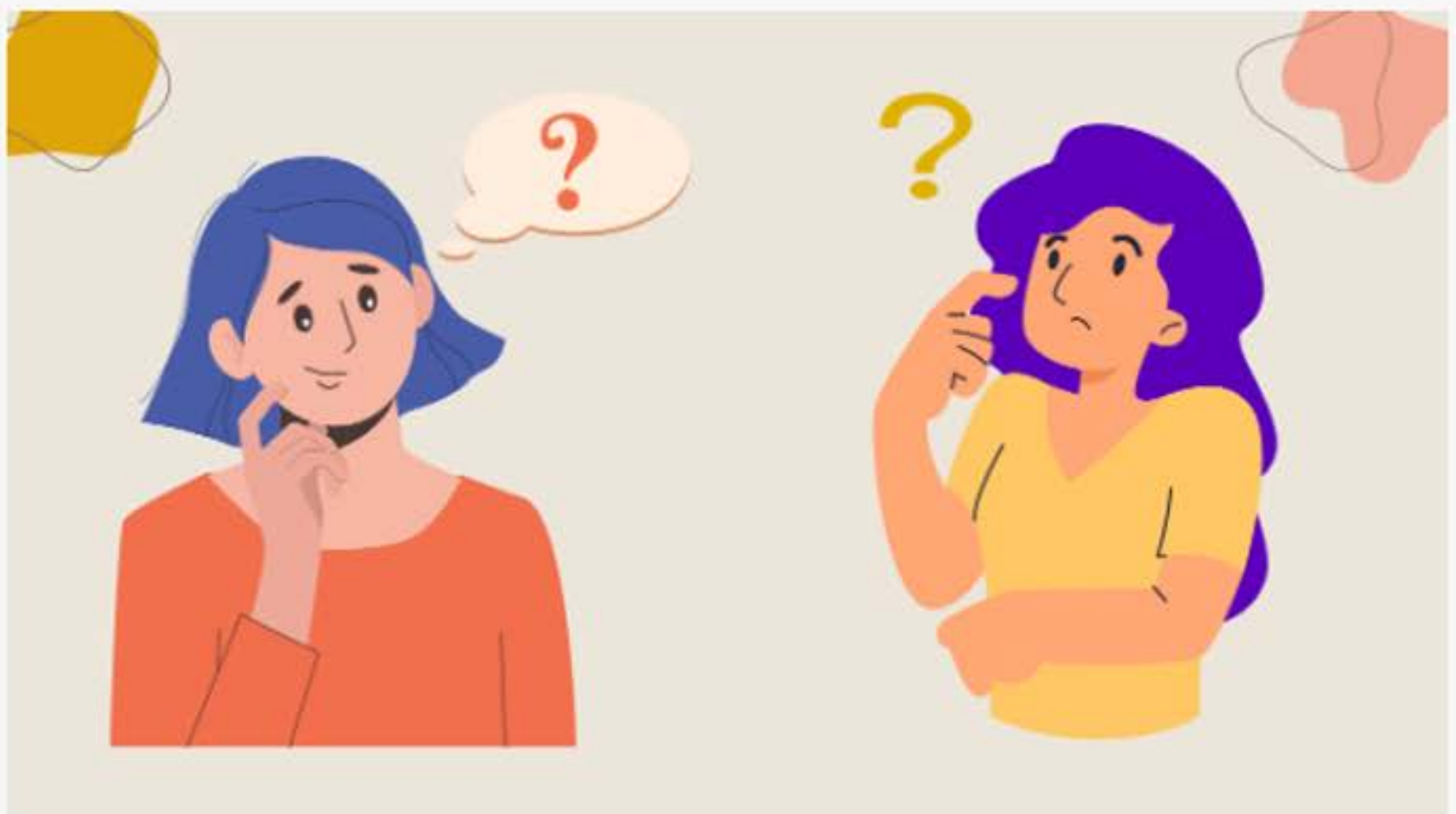
We sometimes get a little help from our friends, or call in an expert. Like when a parent wondered if her son would be Jewish without a bris, we consulted a rabbi. Other times, we lean on Yiddish expressions or the Torah: When a reader wondered how to get a coworker to brush her hair, for example, I cited the story of Samson and Delilah to show that policing other people's hair has always been a way to humiliate and weaken others.

If you've always wondered what motivates people to seek advice from strangers — in a public forum no less — rather than ask someone they know, I have thoughts. For one thing, there's something validating about having your concerns recognized publicly. But it can also be a simple way to get help. I've written letters to many advice columns myself over the years because sometimes I just want a straightforward, objective opinion from someone who doesn't know a thing about me.

You'll get that and more from Bintel, and contacting us is easy: No preambles, sign-ups, disclosures or fees — just write that email. We won't print your name, and we'll give you the reality check you need, along with practical guidance on next steps, all through a Jewish lens.

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## ARE ADVICE COLUMNS REAL?



When *The New York Times*' Ethicist column ran a letter from someone saying they'd kept a \$25,000-a-month trust fund secret from their spouse for 15 years, some readers expressed incredulity. "This letter has to be a prank," said one.

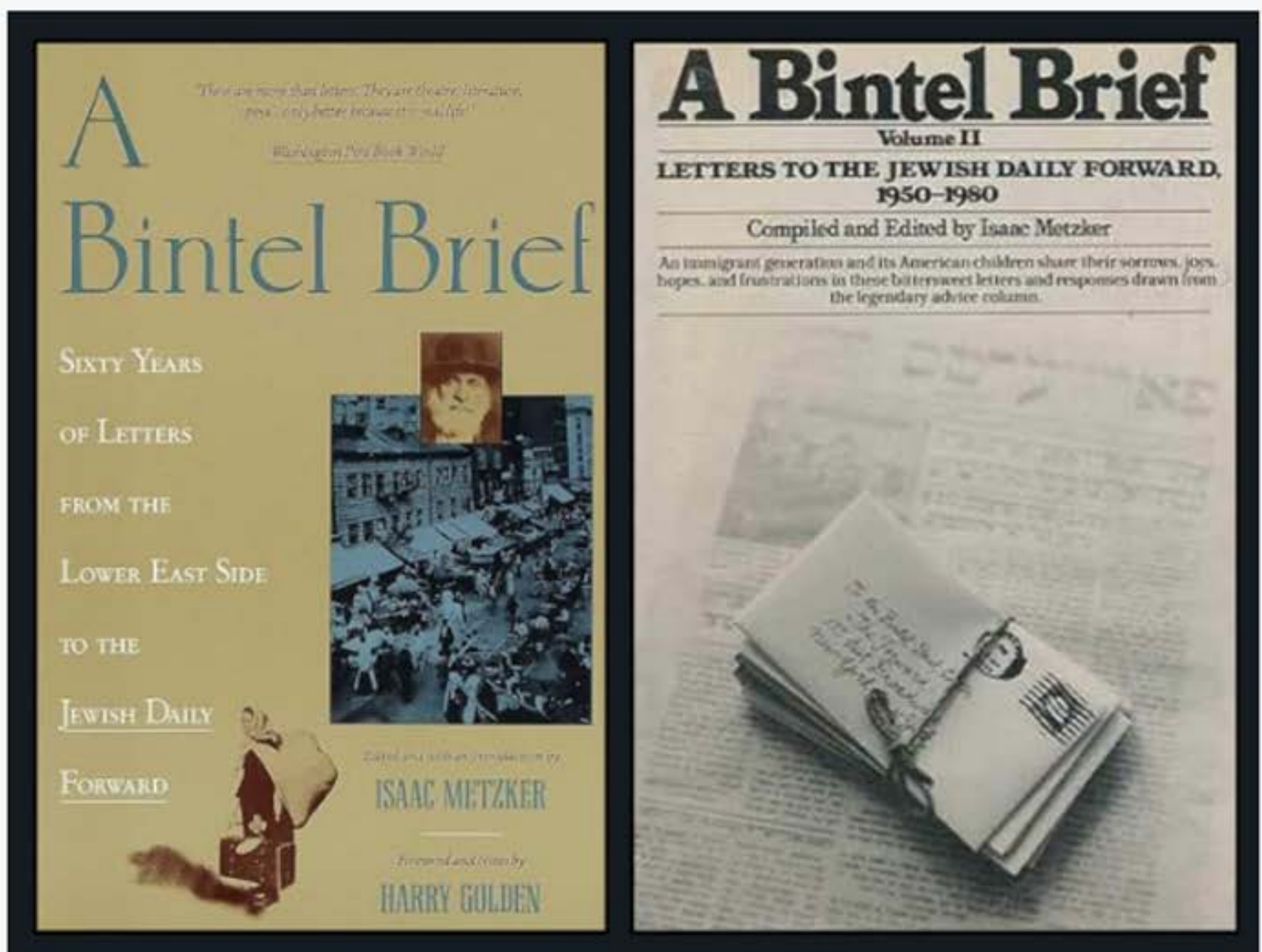
When *BuzzFeed* asked a half-dozen columnists (including two of my faves, [Ask a Manager](#) and [Dear Prudence](#)), if they ever get fake letters, they said they discard anything that seems too outrageous to be true.

Here at Bintel, we often email our letter-writers before and after publishing their queries. That adds a layer of confidence to the validity of the back stories. In an era where we are all awash in fake news and manipulated photos on social media, it's important that what you see in the *Forward* is true.

I can personally attest to the veracity of other advice columns because I've had my own letters published. "Beth from Brooklyn" in this [Ask Vanessa column](#) is me, seeking fashion advice, of all things; and [Social Q's answered my query](#) on what to do when the person sitting next to you in a theater starts snoring. (So awkward! I still struggle with this. What would you do? [Email me.](#))

But advice columns aren't just about helping the people writing in. Their problems are often resolved long before the columns run. Instead, we hope our guidance will be useful to a broad range of readers for whatever they're going through — as well as entertaining for those of us who are fascinated by other people's problems.

## BINTEL HISTORY



Advice columns have been around for centuries, going back to *The Athenian Mercury*, a London publication that answered readers' letters beginning in 1691. A Bintel Brief — the Yiddish term for a bundle of letters — just had its 118th birthday.

Chana Pollack, the *Forward's* archivist, has helped me appreciate Bintel's history. She told me that Bintel was such a big deal in its early years, fans used to wait in the lobby of the Forward building on the Lower East Side to get the column hot off the presses. We've also gotten letters from readers remembering how families and neighbors would sit around debating Bintel's advice.

Chana also steered me to read two published collections of Bintel letters, [A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward](#) and [A Bintel Brief: Volume II](#). Many of those early Bintels included heartbreaking letters from workers in sweatshops, victims of sex-trafficking, and women whose husbands had run off, leaving them and their children destitute. (The paper even established a "Gallery of Missing Husbands" with photos to hunt those men down.)

Gradually, as immigrant Jews moved into the middle class, Bintel changed. Readers weren't worried so much about survival. Instead, they sought advice on things like making a second marriage work or assimilated children rejecting tradition.

But Bintel also educated immigrant readers about the nuances and realities of American culture, explaining to a Jewish man, for example, why a Black woman in the South rejected his marriage proposal, or why the aging founder of a family business should step aside and let his son modernize the shop.

In one case, Bintel even helped reunite a family: A reader recently wrote in to say that her great-grandmother Hanna Meirovitz was brought to the U.S. from Eastern Europe after World War I because Hanna's son recognized her story in a Bintel letter and was able to track her down.



## Dear Bintel ...

*Could you use Bintel's advice?*

Use our online form →

Email [bintel@forward.com](mailto:bintel@forward.com) →

OR [message us on X](#) (formerly known as Twitter).

## BINTEL TODAY

Bintel still gives advice on family problems and affairs of the heart, along with religious questions and practical matters. Recent letters have included [coping with retirement](#); a [sibling rift over Israel](#); a [crush on a rabbi](#); and quandaries related to [keeping kosher](#) and [antisemitism](#). Most of our letters come by email these days, but occasionally we ask people who've posted queries about Jewish life in online forums if it's OK to respond to their dilemmas via Bintel. We also often put our columns on social media, then [share the reader comments in follow-up stories](#).

Chana and I have done a few public conversations, too, sharing Bintel's history and insights, and taking audience questions for real-time advice. The video below shows our event last year at the Museum of Jewish Heritage's Mishpachah Festival. [Email me](#) to book us for your synagogue, library or podcast!



Before I came on the Bintel scene, my predecessors Ginna Green and Lynn Harris took the advice column to the audiosphere, with [two seasons of A Bintel Brief podcast](#). Each episode has Ginna and Lynn answering a contemporary question and then consulting Chana, who brings wisdom from the Bintel archives. They're all as relevant today as ever.

[Listen Here](#)

After the Oct. 7 attacks, Bintel went on hiatus; we were too busy covering the war to think about anything else. (But check out [Israel Therapy](#), a different sort of advice

column, by our contributor Libby Lenkinski.) We resumed Bintel a few weeks ago, because, well, people need advice now more than ever. Let us know what you think about our latest columns, [send in your own questions](#) and [please forward this email to friends and family](#). You don't have to be a *Forward* member to ask Bintel's advice, but if you appreciate the column, [we'd love your support](#).

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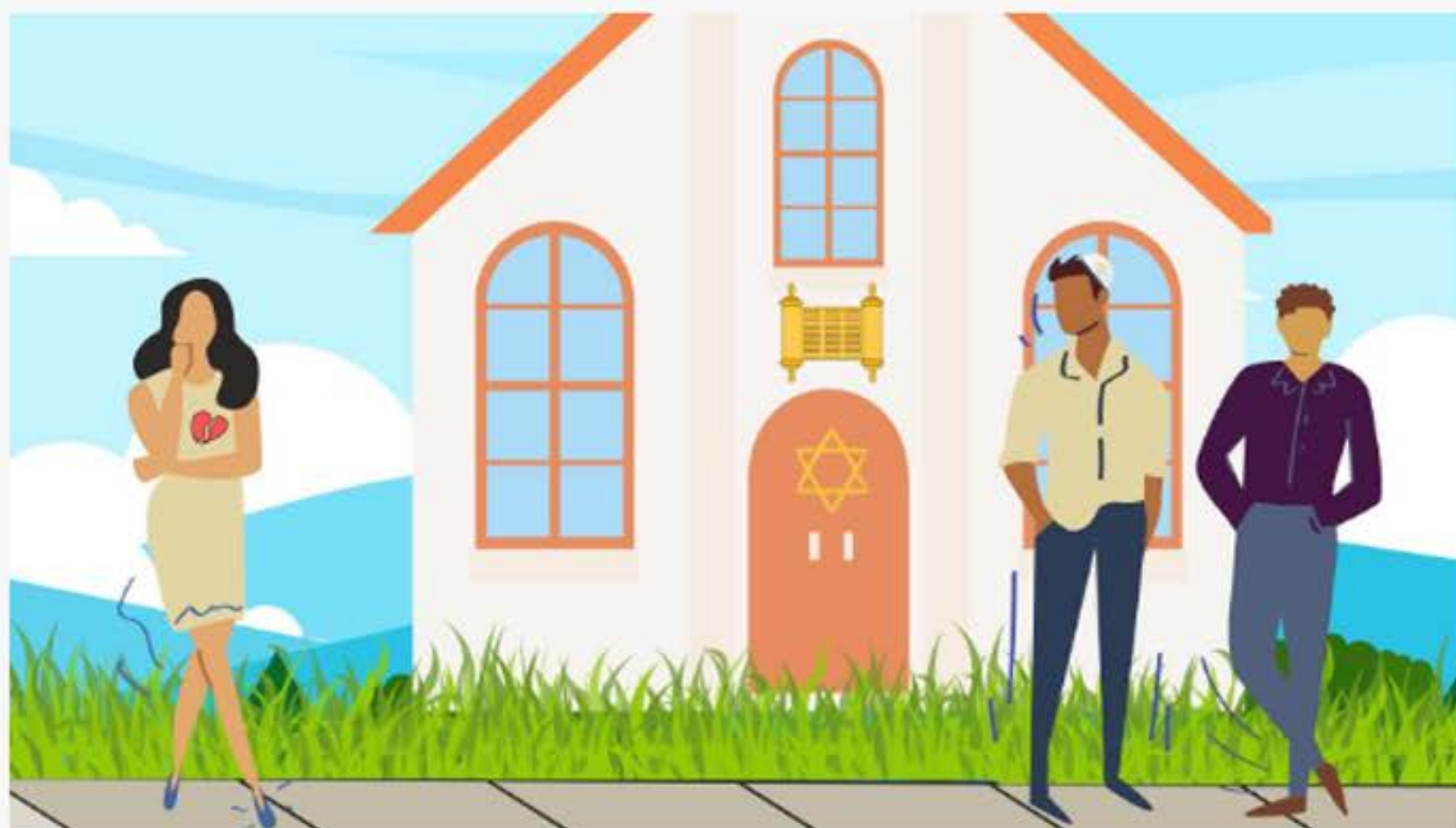
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## Catching up with Bintel

*ICYMI, here are the columns we've run since our last newsletter:*

- [Who gets the shul in a breakup? I hate running into my ex at services!](#)
- [Dad wants to scatter mom's ashes in Israel. Should I go to court to stop him?](#)
- [How do I tell a coworker that she needs to brush her hair?](#)
- [Coping with a noisy neighbor: Bang your own \(proverbial\) teakettle](#)
- [Mom's overwhelmed by her \*vilde chaya\*, a wild child right out of a Maurice](#)

***Without you, the Forward's stories don't just go unread — they go untold.***

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## MAILBAG



We love hearing from readers whether they agree or disagree with our advice. You liked it when we told the person [criticizing a coworker's hair](#) to shut up, with one reader responding: “Excellent response to the question about policing a co-worker’s hair! I too am a frizz head.”

But when we told an adult child seeking to stop his [father from scattering his mom's ashes in Israel](#) that he doesn't have to go with dad, but he should let the man do as he pleases, a reader countered: “If this were my father, I would travel with him or help finance a sibling to travel with him to ensure that he both reaches his destination and returns home safely.”

And readers had lots of suggestions for the nursing home resident whose [neighbor blasts the TV, ruining his sleep](#). The neighbor, you said, should get a headset.

earbuds or a bluetooth-enabled amplifier that streams directly to a hearing aid.

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