

BALANCING CAREER AND FAMILY IN JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE

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Achieving balance between life and work maybe an illusion. To have it as a constant goal may be self-defeating. In spite of our deepest longings, we have to make choices.

Like many professionals in Jewish communal service, I was influenced by experiences at summer camp, day school, youth groups, and in Israel and by language, culture, and peoplehood. Early on, someone told us that we had something to give to add value to the Jewish world, and more than taking a job, we felt we answered a calling to do good and repair the world. In turn we hoped to find a unique sense of achievement.

I have worked in JCCs, federations, a national Jewish organization, and now a foundation committed to Jewish leadership. I moved from one country to another, from one city to another—all part of the prescribed formula to advance in the field of Jewish communal service—and I did so with an excited sense of adventure. I made long-lasting friendships with lay people and professionals and took joy in sustaining them.

I did not marry until I was in my mid-thirties, and when I became a mother years later I needed to create a valuable support system to help me survive this new challenge. I had lectured in front of a thousand people, I had managed budgets of millions of dollars, I had lived through community crises of great proportions, yet I had never held or diapered a baby. I had never been a wife, mother, and Jewish communal executive all at the same time; the very thought was terrifying, and few understood the challenge.

In the early 1990s, when I was the executive of the Greater Hartford Jewish Federation and my son was a toddler, I had the privilege of participating on a panel at an Association of Jewish Community Organization Professionals (AJCOP) conference with Stephen Solender, then CEO of UJA-Feder-

ation of New York, and Marty Kraar, then CEO of the Council of Jewish Federations, two of the top professional leaders in the field of Jewish communal service. I spoke on “The possibility of finding beauty, truth, fulfillment, and meaning in an organizational environment dominated by demands for more work, greater productivity, pressures to produce, urgency to be relevant, while dealing with modern-day stresses.”

After our presentations, the chairperson asked us to reflect on questions related to finding balance between our work and personal lives: what we read, how we relaxed, how we found the time to exercise, how we spent our down time socially and recreationally, and how we dealt with crises and stress. Listening to my colleagues’ answers, I felt like I lived in another dimension. When it was my turn, I answered with candor each question as did they, revealing that it was very difficult for me to keep all these balls up in the air at once without an occasional thud.

For almost my entire professional life I have been trying to achieve this goal called balance, conjuring up an image of equanimity, composure, poise, and stasis, all very neat and measured. Even the image of being off balance is asymmetrical and uneven, like a messy unmade bed. I was determined to find balance, understand it, and train others to have it—yet it eluded me.

For so long I would feel personally uncomfortable with the words of the poem, “Woman of Valor,” and its implicit burdens. Though I acknowledge it resonates for many, for me it felt exhausting to achieve all that this biblical woman could do at home and at work, always imparting wisdom while rais-

ing children, taking care of her husband, and functioning with seamless calm.

Yet if I understood that I could not be this Eyshet Chayil and that was alright, why did I continue to seek balance, certain that if I found it, my life would be more peaceful and my personal and professional life would achieve the maximum? I now acknowledge that achieving balance may be an illusion, and to have it as a personal goal may be self-defeating. *FastCompany* magazine refers to balance as the "Holy Grail" in the new world of work. Everyone wants it, yet few achieve it.

Understanding that there are certain issues we share with the rest of the world is reassuring. Business people, lawyers, doctors, and politicians also wrestle with the challenge of creating that balance in life between pursuing professional goals and staying connected to that which gives personal life meaning. However, we feel a powerful responsibility to make this Jewish world more richly and intensely Jewish, more compelling, relevant, and strong with institutions that reflected all these qualities, and there are often contradictions between the demands of our Jewish workplace and creating a personally meaningful Jewish life with time for ourselves.

We run the risk of feeling lonely and alienated, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, blurring personal and professional boundaries to the point of losing our privacy. Neither scenario is optimal; both can lead to burnout and dissonance as a result of a built-in tension between the visionary professional and our needs as a private Jewish citizen.

In real life we don't get to do it all. Ellen Rifkin, in her review of Naomi Shepherd's provocative article, "A Price Below Rubies: Jewish Women as Rebels and Radicals" writes: "Our vision of social change may include planet earth and every creature on it, but our commitments to women's health, or to the lives of children, or to Jewish cultural survival, for example, may claim the actual time and energy we have to give. In spite of our deepest longings, we have to make choices."

And so on reflection, I realized my life

has been one of weighing trade-offs, slowing down, speeding up, and making choices. When I left a position at a national Jewish organization in the early 1980's and moved to another community to a lesser position in order to create a life and family with my husband, I was told then that my opportunities to ever be an executive of a Jewish organization had ended. I accepted this as a consequence of choice, even while acknowledging that my male colleagues rarely had to make such choices. Several years later I was presented with an opportunity I thought I would never have—to be an executive—which meant working even harder, adding new pressures to an already stressed life. Yet, I felt this was a risk worth taking.

We sometimes get sucked into the pathology of sacrificing or destroying our personal lives in order to achieve the communal good. However, we need to believe that dreams matter, and to acknowledge the truth in the belief that taking care of oneself is critical to saving the Jewish world. There are demands made of us and by us that are unreasonable and unobtainable. We need to articulate our realistic needs; otherwise we will be angry at not having our unexpressed expectations met.

I hope we can create organizations that encourage people—both laypeople and professionals—to articulate personal priorities and to recognize them as whole people without competing but complementary priorities. I hope we can create honest workplaces that are sensitive to the needs of new professionals; that can nurture them, train them, honor them and keep them happy; and in which professionals will not be embarrassed to tell laypeople that a sick child needs to be picked up at school or that a promise to be in the synagogue choir requires a commitment to be at rehearsals and can another meeting date be chosen. In this way I hope we can re-emerge as an open-minded field of Jewish communal service, one that is supportive and caring, and will enhance the quality of saner Jewish lives for us and our children's children.