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## FAMILY MATTERS

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### Mother as Juggler

Arlene (Ari) Istar Lev

There is an old Jewish story that goes something like this:

Once upon a time there was a man who lived with his wife, seven children, and aging mother-in-law in a small house. The house was always noisy and messy, and one day he just couldn't take it anymore and went to the Rabbi for advice. The Rabbi smiled and said, "Do you have chickens?" "Yes," the man said, "I have chickens." "Well, bring the chickens into the house." "Into the house?" the man cries. "Try it," says the Rabbi. The man leaves muttering, but dutifully brings the chickens into the crowded house. A week later he returns to the Rabbi, tears running down his face. "Rabbi," he says, "The house is worse than ever. The chickens are squawking, and there is poop everywhere. This was a horrible idea. Please help me." The Rabbi smiles, "Do you

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have a goat?” “Yes, Rabbi, I have a goat,” he answers. “Bring the goat into the house too.” The man cannot believe his ears, but dutifully brings the goat into the house to join the chickens and his family. The next week he returns to the Rabbi, tears streaming down his face. “Please Rabbi, please help me, my house is a zoo, my family is out of control.” The Rabbi gently says, “Bring the chickens and the goat back to the barnyard.” The man does as he is told and returns to the Rabbi a week later, “Oh Rabbi,” he says, “You are genius. My home is so quiet and clean and spacious with just me, my wife, my mother-in-law, and the seven children.”

I hope the moral of the story is obvious: Be grateful for what you have because, the Jewish sages teach, it could always be worse. The story, by the way, works just as well, when the lesbian rabbi uses it to comfort her crying lesbian congregant, and I know that for a fact. In this case, it is the lesbian rabbi who actually has the chickens and the goat(s) along with a gaggle of children, depending on how many children they are fostering in a given week. The lesbian congregant, in this case, actually has all her animals living in the house already. That would be one guinea pig, two hamsters, two cockatiels, a canary, a large water turtle, two 55-gallon fish tanks, and a skink. Well, technically we also have many crickets, but since that is the skink’s food, I can’t really count them as pets.

We did have a dog. We got the dog to replace the two dogs and one cat that had recently died of old age. My partner started searching on the Internet for a rescue dog (homeless pets on doggie death row who needed a home immediately). I put my foot down: “No more animals,” I yelled. My partner respectfully acquiesced and then wrote a \$300 check to save Abbey—a regal, sweet, pit bull dog who was gentle with children. Abbey arrived with severe arthritis, needing hundreds of dollars worth of medication to enable her to limp from one room to another. It soon became apparent that she was completely deaf, requiring a human to pursue and coax her back to the house every time she needed to go out. Abbey had a very loved life for the few short months she lived with us, until she was diagnosed with lung cancer. Although I was sad when Abbey died, I will always think her death, like removing the goats from the house, as a sacrificial act of kindness and compassion—this will become clearer momentarily.

It all started when my partner decided to change careers. Describing the zoo that is my home, it will not surprise you to know that she decided to become a dog groomer. My fantasy, of course, is that after a full work

week of caring for animals, she will stop bringing them home! I support her decision to return to school wholeheartedly and, all things considered (which they were), bringing this career change to fruition has been well thought out, well planned, and accomplished with relative ease. There was one small glitch. She needed to go to school for 4 months. For those of you who have completed Ph.D. programs, you must think, “How bad can 4 months be?” Well, how about 4 months in another city, nearly 4 hours away? Oh, well, still not so bad, which was exactly what we thought.

There are just a few things you need to know before we continue. The first is that I am not a morning person. I can just see the smile on your face and slight rolling of your eyes, when you read those words, proving that you really don’t get it. I am really not a morning person. I planned a work life that starts about noon. I wake up slowly and grumpy. I need two cups of coffee to just stop walking into walls. I work until early evening and generally am awake burning the midnight oil. I do the evening and night shift at home; my spousal unit does the mornings. When I was surfing the Internet the other night (about 2 A.M.), I discovered that my normal sleep/wake rhythm is actually a diagnosable disorder: circadian rhythm disorder. So perhaps saying that I have a sleep disorder will convey how hard mornings really are for me. While my partner was gone grooming, I had to do the morning shift as well as the evening shift, burning the candle at both ends—a great metaphor methinks.

The second thing you need to know is that my partner has two jobs on the weekend: she teaches Jewish Sunday school and runs a group for teenage girls. The first week she started school the other group leader quit (shockingly, having a new baby was harder than she’d imagined). So my partner “had to” (her words) step in to run two groups. Although technically home on the weekends, she functionally doesn’t arrive until 8 P.M. on Friday evening (after picking up fresh crickets, a job I refused to take on) and leaves on Sunday afternoon. As you might imagine, she is a tad tired on Saturday.

The last and final thing you need to know is that I am the primary breadwinner. During those few precious hours the children are in school (except for the 2 weeks off for school break and the 6 snow days), I try to run my business, provide clinical work to 30 families, supervise five clinicians, teach two graduate classes, and entertain the media with scholarly quips and clinical expertise about queer families. I arranged during this 4-month period to only do presentations I could bring the children to (because that would make it easier, right?!). My partner is generally the househusband, the one who drives the kids to and from school and after-school activities;

she does all of the cooking, half the housework and runs most of the errands. Did I mention she would be gone for 4 months?

Perhaps you have seen the “The Mom Song,” by Anita Renfroe sung to *William Tell* Overture on U-Tube.com? Hilarious and painfully accurate, she details at a rapid pace and gaining in pitch and intensity the words mothers (and I presume fathers) say to their children during the course of day (“Get out of bed! Hurry Up? Where’s your books and your lunch and your homework at? Grab your coat and gloves and your scarf and hat?”) My partner and I watched it with tears streaming down our faces. Our 12-year-old looked confused and then a bit frustrated. “She sounds like the two of you; she really should calm down,” he said before returning to his video game. I would like you to imagine the *William Tell* Overture in the background while I outline the past few months of my life.

The alarm rings at 6:15 A.M., and given my recently diagnosed sleep disorder, if I am very lucky I’ve had 5 hours of sleep. I wake the kids up five or six times and then line everyone up for their morning shower. My shower is always cold by the time I get in; sometimes I have to step into ice-cold bath water since my son likes to fill the tub with water while he showers. This is an improvement, since he used to like to rub bar soap all over the bathtub floor so he could “slide” in the bathtub. The kids need constant reminders to comb their hair (“I don’t know where the pick is”), pack their homework (again, since they supposedly did this the night before), remove their towels and pajamas from the floor (“I did,” they say while stepping on it), while I feed the menagerie of animals their various seeds, carrots, shrimp pellets, and, of course, crickets. The turtle waits for me greedily every morning, following me back and forth in the tank, cajoling me into feeding her more pellets than recommended, while the cockatiel perfectly and repetitively imitates the phone ringing, while I loudly echo him, yelling, “Will someone get the phone?”

School starts at 8:20, and I seem to always be the last parent in the car line. Two mornings a week other parents have kindly offered (okay, we begged them) to drive the kids to school. The pressure on those mornings is much worse because no matter how early we wake up and how efficient the system I develop, one child always needs to change his pants after the cereal spill, or the other child can’t find his shoes or winter coat, while the parent helper stands there with a frozen smile, “Oh, it’s like this at our house, too,” they lie, and nervously check their watch. They are never the last parent in the car line.

I pick up the children from school at 3 P.M. (“I’m *starving*,” they yell every day), run all necessary errands, and then drive them home to meet

the babysitter, who is with them until 8:30 at night while I go back to work. On the days I do not go back to work, I drive the kids to flute lessons, ice skating lessons, piano lessons, and Hebrew School. The flute teacher can only work Thursday, the piano teacher can only work Wednesdays. Hebrew School happens between ice skating lessons and piano lessons, which sadly happens in two cities that are a half hour away from one another. So Wednesdays looks like this: I pick the kids up, including Sophia and Max, who also need a ride to ice skating. I then have an hour to catch up on work phone calls while I stand shivering in a freezing-cold skating rink smiling and yelling, “Looks great,” “Be careful,” and then, “No, not you,” to the gentleman on the phone who clearly is not used to professionals who have to balance childcare with business needs. We have 45 minutes (assuming that there are no knots in the skate laces) to grab something to eat (“grab” infers something not ecological, not healthy, and barely edible that swims around all of our bellies for the next few hours imploring even the little one to say, “Can we eat something healthy tomorrow?”) and then drop off child Number One at Hebrew School. I then take child Number Two across town to his piano lesson. We arrive home about 8 P.M. and first start homework, leaving precious little time for our evening cuddling and reading. After the kids fall asleep, I attend to the daily accumulation of about 100 E-mails (Do you seriously think being able to check my emails from my cell phone would make my life easier?).

There are a few other things I haven’t mentioned. My older son will become Bar Mitzvah next year. That means in addition to Sunday school one day a week, he has Hebrew School one night a week. He is supposed to meet with the rabbi once a week (an idea I squelched early on) and the entire family is supposed to attend a Bar Mitzvah group once a month to support us in this journey to his manhood. (Don’t you think a gift certificate to a Spa would work better?) It is, of course, expected that we attend the Bar and Bat Mitzvah’s of the other children in our group. Then, there is his requisite community service volunteer experience, which means the parents must volunteer to drive him there and pick him up. Becoming a Jewish man is no doubt challenging, requiring a bit of parental direction, which commonly takes place long after lights out when he quietly calls, “Momma, I can’t sleep.”

Now, I would just like to say that I do not find comments like, “Just slow down,” or “Why don’t you take time for yourself?” particularly helpful. When a friend asked, “Isn’t there something you can give up?” I volunteered to give up the IRS audit and the furnace breaking down (four times in one 48-hour period). So, for the record, we have given up many things, but

remember, it's only 4 months, and we wanted their lives to remain as normal as possible. Please don't laugh. Consistency is good for children, and we are consistently late.

Part of my parental philosophy (are you taking notes?) is to offer my children a well-rounded life, and since I am not at all athletic or musically inclined, I provide each child with music lessons and one sport each. I would just like to review the finances of these commitments which is one reason I can't just "slow down." Flute lessons for child Number One \$28 a week; Piano lessons for child Number Two \$35 a lesson; Ice Skating, the only sport child Number One has ever shown interest in, turns out to be one of the most expensive sports: \$25 for a half-hour lesson, plus ice time (yes, I said ice *time*). His made-to-order figure skates cost \$200. We do rituals over his size 11 feet nightly to stunt their growth. (Yes, you read that right, 12 years old, size 11 feet.) Child Number Two has sacrificed his gymnastic lessons until his other mommy is back home; he is satisfied doing cartwheels off the couch for his daily exercises.

Did I mention the orthodontics? I mean the second round of orthodontics. The first round cost \$2000; this round cost \$4,000. This involves weekly appointments scheduled during school hours (?!). This means my son misses science class, and I come home ever Wednesday to E-mail admonishments from his science teacher. Needless to say, I'm also missing work to chauffeur him there. The orthodontist needs us to remove four healthy teeth in order to make room in his mouth for the \$4,000 dollars of equipment (well, he didn't really ask *us* to do it, but how hard could it be? Given the flack that comes out of my son's preteen mouth I have contemplated removing the teeth myself and then stapling his mouth shut.) The teeth removal is another \$500, and "No, ma'am, we do not have a payment plan." The orthodontist also suggests that we start speech therapy to address his "tongue-thrusting," which, if not addressed, will definitely push his teeth out of alignment, reversing all the work that's been done.

So in addition to my clients, students, and office needs, I transport children to various lessons, make sure they do their homework, practice their music, study Hebrew, brush and floss the braced teeth three times a day, do tongue exercises ("Daily, would be best"); I also do all the laundry, grocery shopping, and try to unbury the mess in the house at least once a week. My younger son has gone to school wearing my socks, my older son once carried an empty lunch box to school, and one awful day I booked three clients in the same hour. Somehow we have survived with the help of a childcare worker, a house cleaner, three friends helping to chauffeur children, and a freezer full of frozen food. Unfortunately, the

above schedule leaves no room for things like writing deadlines, doing insurance billing, or grading papers, which is how I spend my weekends.

Despite my best intentions, there are days when it all backfires. Like the day child Number One forgot his school books, and I went running down the street in my pajamas and red slippers in the snow trying to catch the lovely gay dad (Thursday morning chauffeur), and returned to the house to discover the small embroidered bag for orthodontic care neatly sitting neatly on the kitchen table; I confess I cried. Wiping my eyes, I walked into the living room to take care of the animals and discovered the fish tank filter wasn't working, and the hamster's cage was opened. My partner walked me through repairing the fish tank from her cell phone while she drove to school. I went to work without my requisite cold shower that day. I found the hamster two days later, poking out from under the refrigerator.

Did I mention that my car broke down during this 4-month period three times and cost nearly \$1600 to repair? Once the car broke down in a blinding snow storm, blocking the off-ramp of the highway. (Did anyone think that blasting their horn would help me move? Don't they think I would've moved, if I could've moved?) Thankfully, due to the joys of cell phones, I arranged for my children to get picked up from school (same lovely gay dad) and get my car towed to a garage. However, the AAA driver, after burping his bacon sandwich in my face, left me on the roadside trudging in knee-high snow carrying the \$800 flute in one hand (it must've been a Thursday) and a booster seat in the other so that child Number Two would be safe getting to school the next day. (Yes, I take car safety very seriously, especially since the death of 5-year-old friend; booster seats need to be used until a child is at least 8 years old, over 80 lbs or 4'9". It doesn't just lift up their bodies to see better outside the window; it protects their internal organs when used properly. There is no punch line; this is no joke.)

I e-mailed the story of my life to one friend saying, "I barely have time to cut my toenails." Ze said I should be careful or I would poke someone's eye out. Let us just say, we've had no time for *that*, okay? Another friend said she wasn't sure if I was trying out for a comedy routine (a stand-up therapist?). Yet another friend said she was exhausted reading about it and had to go right to bed. Me too, I have to go right to bed, after I make sandwiches for lunch, fold the laundry, and finish this column. Now you know why I think Abbey the dog's sudden death two days before my partner left for school was a sacrificial act of kindness and compassion? Having to walk the deaf, arthritic dog outside and back five times a day would frankly have been more than I could bear.

I always tell my clients that it is best, when planning to parent a child with someone else, to be psychologically prepared for the possibility of single parenting because, sadly, shit happens, and even good things (i.e., career changes) can translate into more than one person can juggle in any given day. My social work graduate students, most of whom are barely out of their own parents' homes and only few of whom are parents themselves, are appalled at what they see at their internships: disheveled, unavailable, and abusive parents, out-of-control children who can barely read or write. It *is* appalling, but I, who have such strong management skills, knowledge of child development, and relative financial stability, can barely manage 4 months of single parenting. How much harder is it for many families, mired in generations of poverty, lacking education and social and psychological resources, to manage the juggling act that being a working parent demands? One student wrote me, "I never thought about how hard my mother worked to make sure that I got to my ballet lessons. I need to thank her because she always packed a nice lunch with special surprises." I read that to son Number One, who rolled his eyes and said, "I don't take ballet lessons, but I think getting a surprise in my lunch would be nice."

I have come to know my limits and the cost of living beyond them. My partner is almost done with school, which means very soon she will rise at 6:15 A.M., not me, and she will resume the cooking and chauffeuring of our delightful children so they can play the flute and the piano, attend ice skating and gymnastics, and learn to read Hebrew from the Torah in the footsteps of our ancestors. I can return to my normal 10-hour work day, silently remembering how much worse it was with goats and chickens in the house.