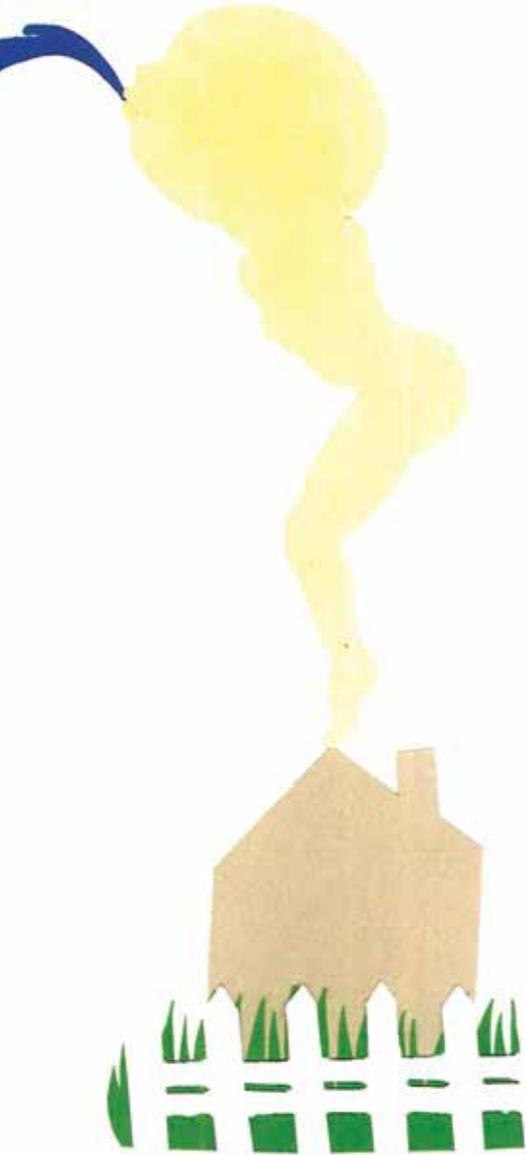


WHEN YOUR WORK CROWDS OUT YOUR ACTUAL LIFE

by TAMAR FOX



For the past few months I've been keeping a chart in my journal noting my feelings each day. Did I have a headache? Feel sad or moody? Bored, stressed? Good/great? Unsettlingly, the most consistently filled-in box is Exhausted. Even on good days (especially on good days) I rarely go to bed feeling anything other than thoroughly worn down and depleted. Between a job I love, parenting, marriage, volunteering, and the occasional freelance writing gig, it feels like **there's never enough time.**



Despite all of this, I recently marvelled, on Facebook, that I feel like the only person I know who doesn't struggle with "work-life balance." I work 9-to-5, and then I hop on my bike and ride the 15 minutes home. I rarely bring work home, and rarely need to stay late. And I've been lucky that for most of my career this has been the case—purely by chance, I've ended up in roles where work really did end at five.

But last week I met with a friend for lunch, and sitting outside, eating salads in the shadow of Philadelphia's City Hall, I laid out some of the craziness on my schedule for the week: taking a friend to a doctor's appointment, scheduling visits for various social workers to come see my foster daughter in our home, organizing our local independent minyan, juggling all of

the daycare drop-offs and pick-ups while my partner was away, and on and on. At one point I had to brush away tears, just thinking about everything there was to do. Maybe, my friend suggested gently, I did struggle with work-life balance. It was just that I had trouble with the life part, not the work part.

What even *is* work-life balance? The more I thought about it, the more I realized I wasn't sure. So I threw together a quick Google survey, and sent around the link. Within 24 hours I had over 200 responses, nearly all full of hair-raising stories of stress and exhaustion.

My study was hardly scientific, but several surprising issues emerged over and over again.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE ISN'T ONLY ABOUT KIDS.

For whatever reason (the patriarchy, mostly; also capitalism), work-life balance is seen as a woman's problem, but 40 of the people who took my survey didn't identify as women, and many of the women who took it didn't have kids, and yet still struggled with work-life balance. A freelancer named Joe, with no children, wrote that, "I feel like I have to say yes to nearly every assignment that comes my way out of fear that if I pass on it, the person who is next in line might jump ahead of me the next time. Because of this, I range from 30-70 hours a week and having a consistent balance is a struggle."

Lots of people did struggle with childcare, but just as many people complained about being overworked. One woman with no kids said she regularly worked 14-hour days, and would come home and rock back and forth like a trauma victim. A rabbi worried about who would conduct a funeral when she was away on a much-needed vacation. Several observant Jews worried about being seen as slackers for taking off so many days for the High Holidays, which often also meant they were left with almost no vacation time that didn't have to be set aside for Jewish holidays. And people without kids still have parents who may need care. Several people wrote about trying to manage a full-time job with a parent who needs full-time care, or is in hospice.

IT'S MOSTLY ABOUT TIME.

There is not enough time in the day for everything that needs to get done, even when we limit ourselves to the most basic necessities. One woman wrote, "I spend almost three hours a day commuting. There is no life to balance...I sleep, I drive, I work. I am too worn out for anything else." Another woman wrote, "There's just too much work to truly take time off. I end up working while on vacation; responding to emails while I'm at the playground with my daughter; editing stories at midnight in bed; etc." When asked to describe her biggest work-life challenge, one woman wrote simply, "I wish I had time to shower daily." Oof.

But it's not just the hours in the day—it's the time off. Many people feel they don't get enough vacation time to take anything like a real vacation. I recently sat down to do my own inventory of days I need to take off for the year. Weddings, family obligations, and Jewish holidays eat up all of my days

and then some. There is no slack. Every time I travel I worry obsessively about what will happen if my flight home is cancelled and I get stuck wherever I am. How will I deal with having to take an unexpected day off?

This is especially frustrating when we all know that offices can sometimes have long stretches where nothing much gets done. In every job I've ever had there have been periods where I was waiting on someone else to send me their work or respond to an email before I could do my own work. This downtime is natural, and to be expected, but it's frustrating to be sitting around waiting with nothing to do, when you know you could be picking up your dry cleaning, making dinner, or exercising. This is even more true when you know that whenever that email does come in, you'll have to buckle down and get the work done immediately, even if it means staying late, or working over the weekend.

NO ONE HAS ANY TIME TO RECHARGE.

When it's nearly impossible to cram the basics into every day, "extras" like getting enough sleep and having time to exercise are always the first to go. Never mind that we're bombarded with stories of studies finding that both are absolutely essen-



Janet L. Yellen, Chair of the U.S. Federal Reserve, spoke at Brown University in May. "Further advancement has

been hampered by barriers to equal opportunity and workplace rules and norms that fail to support a reasonable work-life balance." She advocated for bringing more women into the work force with policies like paid leave, affordable childcare and flexible work schedules.

tial to wellness, health, and the ability to not yell constantly at your friends, colleagues, partner, or children.

For observant Jews, Shabbat can be a bit of a reprieve, but it also comes with trade-offs. While yes, I do tend to take a nap on Saturday afternoon, it probably doesn't make up for the huge sleep deficit I've racked up by the end of the week. And when we host others for Shabbat dinner, or organize a Shabbat service, that means more prep work leading into Shabbat. Shabbat and holidays can be their own circus, with meals to prepare, activities to coordinate, rituals to take part in, plus hosting duties. Not exactly Club Med.

MORE AFFORDABLE AND FLEXIBLE CHILDCARE, INCLUDING EMERGENCY CHILDCARE, IS A NECESSITY.

A huge number of people I heard from mentioned feeling guilty or panicked about their kid being the last kid picked up from daycare. Many mentioned the stress of kids constantly being sick. That's the trade-off of sending a child to daycare. You can go back to work, but only kind of, because daycare means a never-ending parade of low-grade illnesses that require the baby to stay home for 24 hours, and that a parent stay home with them. The illnesses do not stop until at least middle school. One mom I spoke to was dealing with her daughter's *eleventh* case of strep throat in just over a year. Then there are the random half-days of school (were these designed with the express purpose of screwing-over working parents? Or is it just a side-benefit?) and the endless frustrations that go along with a work day that does not fully coincide with a school day. How are we supposed to get children from school to karate or ceramics or music lessons or special services without leaving work early?

SOLUTIONS.

I found a few work-life balance hacks, little tricks that might make life easier if you're struggling to keep up with a demanding job and a busy home life. Obvious, but they work. Make lunches for the whole week all at once (for yourself and/or kids). Plan out a two-week rotation of dinner items and stick to it to eliminate that terrible moment when you get home and have no idea what to make for dinner and what you even have on hand. Every year begin the year by planning for childcare emergencies. Do you have the number of one or two people you can call to stay with a sick child if you must go into work? How will you and your spouse determine who stays home if it has to be one of you? Having a planning conversation about this will make it easier to handle when it inevitably comes up.

But the truth is that work-life solutions need to come from employers and the government. These are systemic problems, and even if you manage to come up with a strategy that works for you this year, the problem persists for everyone else. It's up to the leaders—of our country, and particularly of Jewish organizations, and Jewish-run companies—to work on this.

It's truly amazing how much there is to do. Even progressive organizations often have a terrible work culture allowing for very little life at all. I experienced this myself when I

WHEN THEIR WORKPLACE WAS UNSYMPATHETIC (AT BEST) OR COLD AND COMBATIVE (AT WORST) THEY BEGAN TO LOOK FOR WORK ELSEWHERE.

worked at a feminist non-profit where I didn't qualify for any parental leave when a newborn foster daughter was placed in our home. After a week in which I barely held it together, I finally asked for a week of unpaid leave, weeping in my boss's office. She granted me 20 hours of paid leave (hours, not days) for which I felt enormously grateful. I took the rest of the week unpaid.

These organizations and companies know that their policies don't align with their stated values. But they see that the private sector isn't better, they know they can get away with it, and they are inevitably pressed for cash, so they figure this is a fine way to save money. It isn't.

For 10 years, Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community (AWP) was dedicated to this work. But when AWP closed at the end of 2015, it wasn't because the problem had been solved, though more than 100 Jewish organizations had signed on to work on more "family friendly" policies. AWP only focused on Jewish organizations, though these changes need to be made literally all over the world. Plus, as many of the respondents to my informal survey revealed, the stresses exist for many workers who don't have kids, or other family responsibilities.

So what are the changes that we need?

- Providing significant work-from-home or flextime options to everyone whose job could be done outside the office.
- Real comprehensive paid parental leave for all new parents. Ideally six months, but no less than three.
- At least 10 sick days a year, which can be taken for oneself or to care for a family member.
- Vacation policies that allow for actual vacations, coupled with an expectation that the person will be completely offline and inaccessible while on vacation.

These policies may seem like pie in the sky, but they've also been brought up by an unexpected source: Ivanka Trump. I have my doubts about whether she and her father have any intentions of actually making big changes, and even if they wanted to I doubt they could pull these off. But regardless, there's a very good reason for every boss, CEO, and legislator to consider seriously implementing these proposals immediately: the most consistent message I've gotten from friends, peers, and the people who responded to my survey was that when their workplace was unsympathetic (at best) or cold and combative (at worst) they began to look for work elsewhere. Sometimes they were so miserable, they just quit outright,

even without having anything else lined up.

I know this feeling very well. The day I found out I wasn't going to get any parental leave from my job to care for my newborn foster child was the day I decided I needed to find a new job. I went home and updated my resume that night.

A shocking number of people told me that they walked away from dream jobs because they wouldn't live in a cloud of work-related stress and

drama. Others talked about losing all motivation in their work when told they couldn't work one day from home. Some spoke happily of taking a job that paid less but didn't make them miserable and anxious all day.

I've been lucky, getting jobs where I didn't have to work until late at night, or worry I'd be fired because I had to take a child with asthma to the ER. But now that we all know jobs like mine are out there—let's stop settling for anything less. ■

Tamar Fox is a writer and editor based in Philadelphia. In the past she has written in Lilith about becoming a foster parent, and on "low-touch" parenting.

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