

# THE CONFLICTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY JEWISH MOTHER

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I'd like to begin with a story that will tell you something about what motivated me to design a workshop on the Contemporary Jewish Mother. The idea occurred about a year and a half ago when my son Micah was two. As part of our nighttime ritual, I was reading Micah some of his favorite stories. We had just finished *Curious George Goes to the Circus* and *Curious George Walks the Pets*. Next, we moved on to Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and were finishing off—or so I thought—with the classic bedtime book, *Goodnight Moon*. Now three or four books usually satisfies Micah, but not this night: "Just one more book, Mommy! Please one more book!" How could I resist that endearing plea? It was so genuine, and I thought, how could it hurt? Good for his intellectual growth. So I read one more.

When I finally got back downstairs, my husband, who had overheard this whole conversation, said: "You know, Anne, you were never a prototypical Jewish wife, and I would never attach the stereotype of the defamed Jewish princess to your name, but you are a Jewish mother!" Now, my first impulse was to deny what he was saying, to defend myself, but I didn't. It rang too true. Then I began to think about that stereotype of the Jewish mother: intense; very invested in the details of her child's life; protective—some say, overly so, and so on.

Yes, I am all of that. But how did it happen? When did I change? It seemed odd. I had spent the past ten years counseling women, helping them to keep sight of their own needs, to develop some boundaries between themselves and their children and, most important, to carve out an

identity of their own, separate from those who leaned on them. And yet, here I was merging with my own precious charge.

I felt like I had done a psychological about-face. What was happening to my own identity?

At the same time, I was reading countless articles on the career versus motherhood question: "Executive Guilt" in *Fortune*;<sup>1</sup> "Briefcase, Baby, or Both?" in *Psychology Today*;<sup>2</sup> and *Newsweek's* "America's Mothers—Making It Work—How Women Balance the Demands of Jobs and Children."<sup>3</sup> I became a voracious reader on the subject, but for me, something was missing. While I very much identified with the ambitions of the working mothers they portrayed, that to me was only half the story. The other half—the part of me that couldn't find expression in those portrayals—had, I knew, something to do with becoming a Jewish mother, the bearer of a legacy in which the role of the *Yiddishe Mameh* looms large.

A 1985 study on parental identity by the Institute for American Pluralism<sup>4</sup> talks about ethnicity as a crucial and powerful

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1. Fern Schumer Chapman, "Executive Guilt: Who's Taking Care of the Children?," *Fortune*, Vol. 115, No. 4 (February, 1987), pp. 30-37.

2. Kathleen Gerson, "Briefcase, Baby or Both?" *Psychology Today*, Vol. 20, No. 11, (November, 1986), pp. 30-36.

3. Barbara Kantrowitz and Elisa Williams, Eds., "A Mother's Choice," *Newsweek* (March 31, 1986), pp. 46-54.

4. Lori L. Santo, *Parental Identity: Harmonizing Ethnic Traditions and Contemporary Values—A Summary of a Pilot Study*. New York: The American Jewish Committee—Institute for American Pluralism, 1985.

determinant of how we see ourselves and how we behave as parents. Yet, all the articles I was reading on the work versus motherhood dilemma were culturally blind: silent on the religious and ethnic differences which distinguish women from one another. What I was interested in exploring is what's distinct about the career versus motherhood question for Jewish women. I was curious about the kinds of conflicts Jewish women experience as they attempt to forge new identities as mothers.

#### THE DILEMMA OF THE JEWISH DAUGHTER

The career versus motherhood question hits Jewish women especially hard. Jewish women are faced with a peculiar duality: a duality created by two equally strong and seemingly incompatible ideals within Jewish culture that compete for our attention. One is the centrality of family. The second is the high value given to intellectual achievement and success. That's what the conflict is on the cultural level. On a more personal level, the battle that rages internally goes like this: On the one hand, young Jewish mothers are the descendants of the *Yiddishe Mameh*, bearers of a legacy which places great emphasis on carefully and assiduously nurturing the minds of one's children. On the other hand, today's young Jewish mothers are themselves the recipients of all that assiduous nurturing, Jewish daughters oriented to their own achievement and success. The problem arises in one's self-concept. Contemporary Jewish mothers have been raised to do well for themselves. Before becoming mothers, they judged themselves on their performance and competence as students and later as professionals. Their parents invested heavily in them, and they expect themselves to pay back this investment through their own achievements.

Motherhood creates a conflict in identity for these women because tradition points them in the opposite direction. To be true to the tradition of the *Yiddishe Mameh*, one has to do a psychological turnabout and suspend one's own ambitions to focus on

the interests and ambitions of one's children. The change is a rather precipitous one because there is so little preparation for it.

That is the dilemma of the 1980s Jewish daughter as she enters motherhood. Her challenge is to evolve an identity which can encompass both aspects of her former self and a new emergent sense of herself as a Jewish mother. The question she keeps asking herself is: Are these parts of myself irreconcilable?

#### THE CONTEMPORARY JEWISH MOTHER WORKSHOP

To help young Jewish mothers contend with these internal conflicts and questions, I designed a four-session workshop on the *Contemporary Jewish Mother*. There were three goals for the workshop:

1. to provide a forum for women to begin to work through some of the conflicts between the traditional role of the Jewish mother (with its heavy emphasis on nurturing others) and the more contemporary pull of feminism (with its stress on self-nurture);
2. to offer support for mothers struggling with this conflict; and
3. to give participants a picture of the Jewish mother in historical perspective so that they can better understand the cultural forces that color their own attitudes and values.

The outline for the series was as follows:

Session 1—*The Legacy of the Yiddishe Mameh*: A look at the *Yiddishe Mameh* as a cultural ideal/model and an exploration of how that model shapes our styles as mothers.

Session 2—*Education, Achievement, and the Jewish Woman*: Because of the change in the status and opportunities for women over the past two decades, we, as young mothers, face a conflict that our own mothers and grandmothers didn't. What is that conflict for each of us and how are we responding to it?

Session 3—*To Work Outside the Home or Not—The Dilemma for Jewish Daugh-*

ters: An examination of how our grandmothers and mothers viewed work and how we view it; a discussion of the kinds of factors that bear on our own decisions about working.

Session 4—*A Search for Integration*: How to work toward achieving a solution that's right for each of us—one that blends the values of the past with more current thinking.

#### RECRUITMENT AND GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Recruitment is traditionally very difficult with this group of women. Lindsay Van Gelder in *Ms. Magazine* talks about the problems of organizing mothers of young children on behalf of maternity benefits and child care. She writes: "Those who need them most are too busy reading aloud for the 400th time from Richard Scarry's *Greatest Work Book Ever* to do anything about them."<sup>5</sup>

I encountered similar frustrations in recruiting. Hundreds of flyers were sent to the parents of children in the Jewish-sponsored nursery schools in the area, and phone calls were made as well. Although most women expressed genuine interest in the program and a real longing to discuss some of these issues, due to numerous competing interests few could make the commitment of time. And yet, from the responses of the women who did attend, the need to sort through these conflicts was felt as critical and the lack of opportunity to do so was adding great stress to their already overburdened lives. Most women said they mulled these issues over and over in private, getting nowhere, and the chance to discuss them in a group introduced a lot more clarity to their thinking. Further, they felt validated in their roles as mothers, in a way they hadn't up to now.

5. Lindsay Van Gelder, "Countdown to Motherhood: When Should You Have a Baby?," *Ms.*, Vol. XV, No. 6 (December 1986), p. 76.

What I will describe is a blend of two workshops. One was held in the morning at the Jewish Community Center where child care was offered. The second was held in the evening at a local synagogue. The women who participated ranged in age from mid-twenties to early forties. They were all married, and their children's age range was six months to four years. The women who attended the morning group were home full-time. Of those who attended the evening group, half were working, three part-time and one full-time. All of the women who attended the workshops had worked in a full-time professional capacity before their first child was born. Most of the women were members of a helping profession; social workers were particularly well represented. In addition, there were teachers, a research assistant, a nurse, an audiologist, and an artist. Two of the women had their own small businesses.

#### TRANSITION INTO MOTHERHOOD

During the first session, we looked at what the transition into motherhood has been like for these women. In their introductions to one another, I suggested that they address the following questions: Who were you before you became a Jewish mother; and what has the change into motherhood felt like for you? For these women, as anticipated, the giving up of their former, freer selves did not come easily. Said Karen, an audiologist, and the mother of a two-year-old son:

I've been raised my whole life to do well for myself. During my husband's residency, I landed a wonderful job at a very good teaching hospital in Boston. When he started his practice here in Hartford—I didn't want to give it up. So I started working part-time and commuting. I was in my seventh month of pregnancy when I started thinking—maybe this isn't going to work. Somehow I thought I could continue working and add on the responsibility of being a mother. After my son was born, it took me a couple of

months to realize that my life was never going to be the same. Being a mother was a major commitment. I realized that if I was going to do it well, I had to devote most of my time and energy to it. Now that I've accepted what it entails, I'm a lot happier.

Many of the women in the workshops were in their early to mid-thirties and already well established in their careers. While they felt comfortable with that arena of their lives, entering motherhood was like entering uncharted and alien territory. Many expressed a need for guidance, a kind of mentor in mothering to lead the way.

One woman, a social worker, found her mentor in an unexpected place. She told the group:

When I was pregnant, I remember thinking about my work . . . I'm OK at this, but I don't know the slightest thing about being a mother. Everything was shifting, including how I saw my clients. I recall one case in particular, a woman in her mid-30's, whose children were about four and six. I had been helping her become more aware of her own needs, looking at how she had lost sight of them over the years. Then, well into my pregnancy, my perspective switched. I thought—what a wonderful mother she is . . . so understanding and devoted, so giving of herself. Here I was, her therapist, and I was the one looking up to and admiring her!

To which Beth, one of the businesswomen in the group, asked only half jokingly: "So, did you start paying 'her' for the sessions?"

As I began to work with this group, my expectation was that I would hear a lot about the current pressures on women to achieve professionally. I did, but I heard something else, too: the voice of the past, the perfect-mom syndrome of the fifties re-emerging. Said one woman:

I joined this group because I wanted to talk with other women about what it feels like to be bored at home with your own son, wondering, "Are we going to play that game

again?" and then feeling guilty because you are bored, because you don't have all those wonderful and creative ideas in your head that so many other mothers do about how to stimulate and engage your child intellectually.

What many of the women were describing were the conflicting voices of two generations: the voice of the past asking, "What's wrong with you? You're not content 'just' being a mother?" and the voice of the present asking as insistently, "Is that all you are—'just' a mother?"

What has changed significantly for the current generation of mothers is how they view the period of time devoted exclusively or primarily to mothering. In an earlier age, women readily allowed themselves to reserve time for reveling in the pleasures of infancy and toddlerhood. For new mothers in the 1980s, that time has lost its innocence. It's as if women are looking over their shoulders, questioning and doubting their own decisions. Said Debbie:

My son was very young, maybe only six months when I started looking in the want ads for jobs . . . Not that I was ready to go back to work . . . I wasn't. It was more that I wanted to assure myself that there would be something out there for me when I was ready.

#### THE LEGACY OF THE *YIDDISHE MAMEH*

Even for women who make the decision to stay home full time for the first few years, that decision is itself viewed as fraught with risk. Many of those women spoke of not wanting to get "too involved" in their children's lives or "too invested" in the role of mother. I wondered if that overriding concern with being "too involved," "too invested" in their children's lives represents an attempt to separate from internalized images of the Jewish mother that these women find distasteful and unsettling. During the session devoted to the legacy of the *Yiddishe Mameh*, I asked the women to

look at how they have evolved their own styles as Jewish mothers. I asked them to think of their grandmothers, and to describe them as mothers. Next, I asked, how they would characterize their own mothers? Then I asked them to describe themselves as mothers. Looking at those lists of characteristics, what's changed? What's the same? Which of those characteristics are particularly Jewish? How did they feel about those characteristics within themselves?

There was great agreement among the women about the characteristics that are particularly Jewish. "Intense, protective, devoted, self-sacrificing, warm, loving, and adoring" were all words that were used in their descriptions. Certain values also came through: "the importance of family" and "an emphasis on education, hard work and success." When it came to the question—how do you feel about those characteristics within yourself?—a lot of internal conflict emerged, especially around issues of dependency. Said one woman: "I'm very devoted and protective, but I worry, am I going to make my son too dependent on me?" And another woman: "I was 39 years old when my daughter was born, more than ready to put my career on the back burner. She is my identity right now. Yet, at the same time, I fear becoming like my own mother, who saw her children as extensions of herself . . ."

What I kept hearing from the mouths of these women was a fear of becoming Sophie Portnoy—domineering, intrusive, and destructive to their children's autonomy. Philip Roth has so infiltrated our collective consciousness as Jews and as mothers that we want to deny and stifle the native warmth and enthusiasm that are the positive hallmarks of our cultural legacy as Jewish mothers. As a consequence, young Jewish mothers find themselves in a double bind, degrading the very qualities that give form and substance to their identities as parents.

One of my personal agendas was to help the participants out of this double bind by giving a new cast to the very unflattering

stereotype of the Jewish mother, that is, by reframing the image of the Jewish mother. I did this in several ways. First, we contrasted brief excerpts from the novels of Jewish writers, looking at how radically the depiction of the Jewish mother has changed over the past century. In the earlier writings of Shalom Asch and Henry Roth, for example, the Jewish mother is glorified for her strength, for her ability to nurture and to be a buffer against the outside world. In the later writings of Philip Roth, however, her warmth becomes excessiveness and her protectiveness is translated into a suffocating intrusiveness. We looked at why the radical change and discussed how Philip Roth was viewing his Jewish mother through assimilated American eyes, judging her by Protestant standards. We discussed a 1967 *Midstream* article entitled "In Defense of the Jewish Mother" by Zena Smith Blau.<sup>6</sup> In it, Blau defends the Jewish mother for fostering intellectual independence while tolerating emotional dependence. A strong mother-child bond, characterized by mutual love and dependency, she contends, is the primary way of fortifying the child against external peer pressures and of instilling values central to the continuity of the Jewish people.

We also looked at more recent studies in search of an answer to the question, "What makes our being a Jewish mother different from any other mother?" One of them was a 1982 study by the National Jewish Family Center, "Are Jewish Families Different?"<sup>7</sup> The investigators compared Jewish, Protestant and Catholic families in a large number of areas. Interestingly, the one area in which the researchers did find a significant difference was in attitudes toward childrearing. Jewish families stood out in their desire to motivate their children to achieve, to

6. Zena Smith Blau, "In Defense of the Jewish Mother," *Midstream*, 46 (February, 1967), pp. 42-49.

7. Andrew J. Cherlin, Ph.D. and Carin Celebuski, "Are Jewish Families Different?," The American Jewish Committee-National Jewish Family Center, 1982.

stress the need for education, and to take particular satisfaction in their children's achievements. In a study by Dr. Corinne Krause, *Grandmothers, Mothers, and Daughters*, the responses of three generations of Jewish, Italian, and Slavic women are compared.<sup>8</sup> In response to the open-ended question, "What kind of thing makes you feel good?" Jewish women were far more likely to mention a child's accomplishments than were either their Italian or Slavic counterparts (43% vs. 28% and 25%, respectively).<sup>9</sup>

Judging from the participants' responses, it appeared that the articles and studies did serve to underscore some of the qualities that distinguish Jewish mothers. Commenting on Dr. Krause's study, Beth remarked:

One of the women—not Jewish—in my daughter's play group announced recently that her mother babysits. Of course, the rest of us were all interested in an eligible babysitter. But the woman made a point of saying that her mother's there to "watch" the children, not to "entertain" them, and I thought, can you imagine a Jewish mother just "watching" her children? We're so bent upon stimulating them, playing with them, trying to encourage their development!

Sheila commented that she loved "In Defense of the Jewish Mother":

I totally identified with it. It fit me to a tee. When my daughter is in play group, I get very involved in the play. I'm always there saying, "You have to share—take turns—be nice!" I do it because it's like a reflex, and often when I do it, I think, "I sound just like my own mother." I used to get down on myself for being so much on top of her. Now I see it differently. I'm teaching her values—what's OK and what's not. It's a real activist position, and, looking at it in that way, I feel a lot better about it.

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8. Corinne Azen Krause, *Grandmothers, Mothers and Daughters: An Oral History Study of Ethnicity, Mental Health and Continuity of Three Generations of Jewish, Italian, and Slavic-American Women*. New York: American Jewish Committee, 1978.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

## WORK, ACHIEVEMENT, AND THE JEWISH MOTHER

I asked the group, "If the ideal of the *Yiddishe Mameh* propels us in one direction—that is, to be an active, involved parent concerned with the details of our child's life—doesn't that other cultural ideal, the high value we place on our own intellectual achievement and success, create conflict for us by propelling us in the opposite direction?" In order to help the participants tap into that conflict, I read a quote from the chapter on "The Working Parent," in *The Jewish Family Book*:<sup>10</sup>

I want it all. And I can't make peace with the reality that I can't have it all. I want to be the one to pick up my kid when he falls down, to hear the new words he's trying out, to laugh at his crazy antics. I also went to law school and got a job in a good firm. My job gives me a channel for my own personal ambition, and I can't give up work that gives me such enormous satisfaction. I live with a certain type of frustration that my colleagues and I share. The sharing vents the frustration, but we all know that we live in a no-win situation. We lose if we stay home. We lose if we pursue our careers.

In response, several women said that they felt sorry for this woman. One of the older mothers in the group said, "I can understand her conflict, but my choice was very clear. I chose to be a full-time mother. I might've chosen it all along, but perhaps because I started later, I have less conflict." Others were not as clear and identified closely with the woman in the quote. Judy was one:

The word that keeps coming up for me is "sacrifice." My mother was a self-sacrificing mother. Caring for us was her principal role. She seemed to have few needs of her own. I love my daughter dearly, but I do have needs of my own—working is a primary one. And

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10. Sharon Strassfeld and Kathy Green, Eds., *The Jewish Family Book*. New York: Bantam Books, 1981 p. 115.

somehow, I always feel I'm falling short of what my mother did for me.

What Judy expressed was a common feeling among the women, especially the working women in the groups. These women were almost awed by the amount of their mothers' self-sacrificing and the totality of their efforts. Because that feeling was so pervasive, I decided to investigate with them the source of those introjects. What ideal were they trying to live up to? What mode of mothering did their second-generation American Jewish mothers follow?

With a few notable exceptions, most of the mothers of the women in the group stayed home; or, if they worked at all, their schedules revolved around the hours their children were in school. This generation of American Jewish mothers followed the ideal of the "American lady" that held sway at the time.<sup>11</sup> The "lady" was a woman fortunate enough to be married to a man who could financially support her and her children, freeing her to focus her energies on the domestic front. For many second-generation husbands, the presence of an at-home wife was a sign of their own success, a signal to the Jewish community that they had made good. Because a husband's sense of status required an at-home wife, childrearing was one of the few sanctioned avenues of creative self-expression for these women. These second-generation American Jewish mothers poured their energy, time, and talent into the development and education of their children and became, as one woman in the workshop said, "professional mothers." Much has been written and said about the pressure on children of having to live up to the standards set by two high-achieving parents. How about the pressures on a working daughter of having to live up to

the standards set by one professional mother?

It's not that working is alien to Jewish women. Hardly. It's just that it was not part of the way of life for many of the mothers of these women. They, however, only had to go back one more generation—to their grandmothers' lives—to find examples of mothers who worked. In fact, the word "hard-working" appeared in many of the participants' descriptions of their grandmothers. While the women in the group very much related to their grandmothers' boldness and pioneering zeal, work itself had a far different meaning to that earlier generation. "My grandmother worked for survival, to support her family," said Beth. "Although there are compelling financial reasons for many women in our generation to work, we also work for needs of our own, and that's what's so difficult to reconcile with being a Jewish mother." I asked the women in the group what messages they received from their own mothers about the importance of education and work. Most responded that their mothers emphasized only the practical aspects of working—prepare yourself to work in case you ever have to. When I asked what messages they would impart to their own daughters, the responses were very different: "find something personally enriching"; "something that will challenge you intellectually"; and "do what you love."

In one of the final sessions, we looked at decisions about working and mothering. Financial need and the temperament of one's child were two factors mentioned. Another was the degree of satisfaction with one's career prior to becoming a mother. Adrienne, an elementary school teacher and the mother of three children, said: "I really have no desire to go back to work right now. After all, how many more shoes can I tie?"

Others spoke of the satisfaction their career gives them. It provides them with continuity. They view their involvement in their professions as a kind of anchor that's always there against the ebb and flow of their other roles. Pauline Bart, in an article

11. Sonya Michel, "Mothers and Daughters in American Jewish Literature: The Rotted Cord," *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, Elizabeth Koltun, Ed. New York: Schocken Books, 1976, p. 273.

entitled "Portnoy's Mother's Complaint: Depression in Middle-Aged Women,"<sup>12</sup> writes of the particular vulnerability of Jewish women to mid-life depression because of their total involvement in the maternal role to the exclusion of other interests. It's that kind of depression that these younger mothers want to avoid. Many see working as a kind of psychological bulwark against the loss of their own identity. Said one woman: "Work is something that's mine. It has nothing to do with being Rachel's mommy or David's wife."

Anita Shreve, in her recently published book, *Remaking Motherhood*,<sup>13</sup> states that so much discussion has centered on the absence of the working mother from the home. What about her presence, she asks? She goes on to write of the many ways in which the presence of a working mother who shares that world with her children can enrich their lives. I smiled as I read that. I could not help but think of my son, Micah, who, when he grows up, wants to be a social worker—along with a dancer, a doctor (something his genes tell him to be), a fireman, a wrestler, and a TV news director (what his father is).

Another Micah story: I came home from work early one evening. As I was changing into what Micah refers to as my "fun clothes," he suggested a new game. "You go to school, Mommy. I'm going to swim and to the *Micah Jewish Family Service*." He puts on my swimming goggles, which cover half his little face, and picks up my briefcase, which practically topples him over. Mimicking my words, he sends me off to nursery school and says: "See you later. Have fun." As we frolicked through this role play, I thought, "Here I am the adoring mother, feeling what a marvelous special child he is," and I asked myself, "How much has really changed?" It's true—we

have more of our own separate spheres these days. I didn't go to nursery school, as my son does, at three, and I'm more involved and attached to my profession than my mother was to her work. The dress-up clothes of children have changed: the swimming goggles and briefcase have replaced the high heels and the stoles of an earlier generation. Yet, the feel is so much the same.

#### EVALUATION AND SUMMARY

One of the preliminary findings of the pilot study on parental identity and ethnicity is that "while cultural parenting styles may change from one generation to the next, core issues and attitudes do not."<sup>14</sup> What the workshops on the Contemporary Jewish Mother did for the participants was elevate their awareness of what those core issues and attitudes are. In the process, the ambiguity so many of these women felt about their roles as Jewish mothers diminished. Their evaluations indicated that the workshop served to strengthen their identities both as mothers and as Jewish mothers. One woman said that the importance of her role as a mother has been validated. Others referred to the impact of the series on their identities as Jewish mothers: "I have more respect for being a Jewish mother," said Beth. "The workshop made me more aware of the ways I mother and how it fits with what Jewish mothers have done historically. It made me feel good about being part of that history." The most memorable quote came from Judy:

I've erased from my mind all the negative connotations of being a Jewish mother. In its place is a real pride in a culture that gives such a special place to children. In fact, I've come up with a new name for myself. Instead of a Jewish mother—a name that has been so much maligned—I'm going to call myself a "latter-day *Yiddishe Mameh*."

12. Pauline Bart, "Portnoy's Mother's Complaint: Depression in Middle-Aged Women," *The Jewish Woman*, Koltun, Ed., pp. 72-83.

13. Anita Shreve, *Remaking Motherhood: How Working Mothers Are Shaping Our Children's Future*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1987.

14. Santo, *Parental Identity*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.