

WHEN DO THE BEST REST – AND WHY? A Work in Progress

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As Jewish communal professionals we struggle with the balance between the time spent at work and our own personal time. Although we all agree upon the theoretical importance of taking care of ourselves, too few of us practice self-care consciously and actively. This article argues that self-care is a requisite, not an option in our lives.

At the annual conference of the National Association of Jewish Chaplains (NAJC), I spoke on the topic, “When Do the Best Rest—and Why: Chaplaincy and the Myths of Self-Care.” While this talk was addressed to chaplains, self-care is essential for all Jewish communal professionals.

When putting together the talk and then this article, I struggled not only with the subject matter but also with its very title. In the first drafts, it was entitled, “The Best Never Rest,” because that is what a large part of me believes. It then changed to “Do the Best Ever Rest?”

Deep down, I know the answer needs to be, “Yes. Yes, the best do rest.” I know that if I am to remain healthy, active, and vibrant, if I want to be able to choose when or if I retire, then I need to begin now to take better care of myself, simply because as a child of God, I deserve it.

However, I am not yet at that point, as I continually ask myself, “Is rest a four-letter word?” I can only say that I will take better care of myself because doing so will allow me to take better care of others. That is good, but not really good enough. I am still a work in progress.

My colleague, Rabbi Bonita Taylor, reminds me, “Remember what they say on the airlines? When flight attendants instruct passengers in how to respond during plane malfunctions, they say first to secure your oxygen mask and then, you can help someone else. Take care of yourself first.”

In developing this subject, I immersed

myself in Torah, in the sense of teaching or learning. I began with *Bereshit*, for “in the beginning” I had to think of what to write. Then I turned to *Shemot*, to many of the “names,” my colleagues and friends in Jewish communal service whom I so admire. I wondered what Torah I could offer to them. Next I moved to *Vayikra*, and I “called” upon several colleagues for their advice. Finally, I had to wrestle with these issues and then I was *Bamidbar*, “in the wilderness.”

So now here I am at *Devarim*, where it comes to “words” or “matters.” I am very clear that words do matter, particularly if they lead to action. We know from *Pirke Avot* that action, not study alone, is of fundamental importance (*Mishna Avot* 1:17).

Although we all agree upon the theoretical importance of taking care of ourselves, too few of us practice self-care consciously and actively. We do not take care of ourselves first, second, or third; often, we are not even on our “to care for” list at all! There is always one more client to see, one more phone call to return, one more email to send, one more...

As caregivers we resist understanding the wise counsel offered to Moses by his father-in-law Jethro, found in the Book of Exodus. You may recall that Moses has been meeting with people all day long. He is exhausted and frustrated, as are the people. With a caregiver’s clarity, Jethro tells Moses, “This task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. You will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well” (Exodus 18:18 – note the number of the chapter and verse in which these life-giving words are found: double *chai*).

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A common interpretation of this verse is that Moses needs to delegate some of his responsibilities. However, it has a deeper meaning. Jethro gives Moses this message: "You are going to wear yourself out if you do not get some balance in your life, if you do not set some limits. You need to give up this crazy notion that, as the best, you do not need to rest. That is bad enough. However, the situation is actually worse because Moses, you are going to wear out the people as well."

What does it mean "to wear out these people"?

Moses wanted to do it all. He wanted to lead the people, hear their heartfelt concerns, address their affairs and do so as a patient, caring, compassionate counselor. Does this sound familiar?

It took Jethro to point out that, by creating a situation where he was indispensable, Moses was infantilizing the people. A "true" caregiver would empower the people to take care of themselves.

When we are constantly available, we are saying to our clients, "Here I am, your convenient crutch. Lean on me. You do not have to be strong in your own right. You do not have to develop and rely upon your own inner resources."

Like Moses, we enjoy feeling indispensable. We enjoy it so much that we are more committed to sustaining that myth than to committing ourselves to the *mitzvah* of self-care even, when like Moses, being indispensable actually hurts us – and them.

Think about what you do when you are out of your office. Do you routinely telephone the office, check your voice mail, return phone calls?

How telling it is that today, in synagogue after synagogue, never mind the theater, there are signs instructing us to turn off electronic devices before entering. Our electronic leashes hold us tight, and too often they function as our merciless masters with us, as their submissive servants. They prevent us from taking care of ourselves by making it harder for us to say "no."

Too often, we forget that we are making the choice to be continuously connected. We

choose to be always "on." We choose to be responsive to the newest mantra: 24/7. Recently I read on the Hebrew Union College listserve that a colleague downloads a newspaper from Israel each day onto his Palm Pilot and then reads it while taking his morning walk. Even I was appalled!

At least, he admitted that this practice was a case-study in time *mismanagement*.

Compare this behavior to that of my father, who as a rabbi consciously and conscientiously took time off. Moreover it never occurred to him to check in with the office on one of his days off. My father believed that his congregation could get along without him for a day or a weekend. And he was right.

My father understood that only God is indispensable. Many of us, including me, do not have that same understanding.

There is a further downside to always being there, to always being responsible and responsive. In some ways, we are being intellectually dishonest. While we may tell ourselves that we work so hard because of our commitment to particular clients or patients, the fact is that we are there because it is our paid job or because it makes us feel good about who we are. If conditions changed and we had to take another job, would we commit to weekly visits to those clients? No matter how precious they are in our lives today, for most of us, the answer would be "no." We would find new clients and new patients to wear out with our continuous compassion and love.

ACHIEVING BALANCE

How do we balance the ongoing demands of our position and our need for self-care? How do we avoid burnout? Hillel had it right: "If I am not for myself, who will be?" (*Mishna Avot* 1:14).

First, we need to learn to say "no" to the incessant demands upon our time.

"No" is not a four-letter word, even though many of us think it is. We absolutely need to commit ourselves to having sufficient leisure time.

One way to gain the strength to say "no" is to understand that support is readily avail-

able—if we seek it out. A recent book, *Turn It Off* by Gil Gordon, contains valuable suggestions for how to restructure our lives.

Gordon begins by asking, “How did we become so attached to our offices?” Then, he asks a set of questions to determine whether we have in fact “gone over the line” and provides advice for how we can get back in control, if we wish to do so.

Gordon offers a three-zone model for balancing life and work: 100/60/0. You are in the 100% zone when you are officially “on.” This is the time when your clients and colleagues can expect that you will either be on the job or reachable.

Conversely, you are in the 0% zone when you are officially off – those days you have designated as your days off or the middle of the night.

The hardest zone to define is the middle one, the 60% zone, when you are neither *fleishig* nor *milchig* (though Gordon does not use these terms). Instead, Gordon suggests that we ask ourselves these questions: To what extent are we required to be available and accessible during off-hours, holidays, and vacations? To what extent do we feel obligated or expected to be available and accessible then? To what extent do we want to be totally inaccessible or unavailable then?

There is an ironic side to this dilemma. At times, we do try to get away and ask colleagues to cover emergency situations for us. If those colleagues are unwilling to help us because it coincides with their taking time off, we often feel angry or disappointed. We think, “Where is their professionalism? Can’t they take care of themselves another time?”

Often, we do not even support each other’s efforts to take care of ourselves. And that is no small irony for caring helping professionals!

My colleague, Rabbi Taylor, sometimes challenges me with difficult questions. She asks, “What makes it so hard for you to consider that God wants us to be human BE-ings, not human DO-ings? Why are you always measuring yourself by what you do? Why can’t you just be? God has entitled you from time to time to just BE!”

By nature, I am more of a do-er than a be-er. I measure myself by the amount and quality of my work output. I even berate myself when I do not exercise five or six days a week – a task that is supposed to help me de-stress!

I know that the balance between my work and personal life is not optimal, and that I struggle with “doing” versus “being” every day. Let me share an example of this struggle that occurred several months ago. One afternoon, I decided that I would take care of myself that day. Instead of leaving the office at 6:00 or 6:30 p.m., I went home at 4 p.m., of course taking work with me to do on my home computer after dinner. Never mind that I had been at my office since before 8:00 a.m. and that I did not take a lunch break.

After dinner, I went upstairs as planned, and my computer would not start. There I was, ready to work, and I could not! I could neither access my disks nor even check my email.

At first, I was quite upset, but then, even I had to wonder if God was sending me a subtle message: “You’ve worked enough today, David. Take care of yourself.” I yielded to the opportunity, divine or not, and decided to read a book for pleasure that night. Later, I found out that my 14-year-old son had taken the power cable from my computer to attach to his own. I did not know whether to yell at him or hug him.

Though there certainly are stressful moments at work, I am not worried about burning out. I get a tremendous high from my work at Shalom Park, a senior continuum-of-care center, and day after day, I get positive feedback from the residents, their families, and the staff. Some people even refer to me as the “Good Rabbi.”

That praise is seductive. I would rather work and be acclaimed as the Good Rabbi than almost anything else.

My home is my sanctuary. It is also the place where I must deal with the often uninspiring day-to-day matters that make up domestic life. I have to listen to who did what to whom in the family, to check whether homework is done, and attend to the list of “Honey do” projects around the house. So, doing

good at work becomes more appealing than doing "nothing" at home.

At work, I am something approaching the golden child. At home, I am merely David or Dad. More significantly, my family has keen insights about the real me, under my three-piece suit. They know my frailties and how to push my emotional buttons.

My wife and children are always asking me to cut back, if not at the office then to spend less time on extra-curricular activities. At the same time, they also want me to take care of their wants and their needs. Take care of yourself, I hear, but could you first change this light bulb or unload the dishwasher or speak to your son, or stop by the store and pick up some bread and milk.

Given this choice of professional or personal tasks, I am not sure that I want to cut back. I am also not sure that I can cut back. At the same time, I am increasingly mindful of Jethro's advice to Moses: "You will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well." I like to think that I am hearing Jethro and

recognizing the wisdom of his words, even as I have an approach-avoidance pattern to heeding them.

My wrestling with the question of self-care is not unique. I invite you to consider what you might do to take better care of yourselves. I invite you to come up with your own concepts of rest and wellness for yourselves.

In Exodus 31:17, we read that at the end of creation, God rested. Should we, created in God's image, not do likewise? To achieve true wellness, we too need to achieve *nafash*, rest, a *nafash* that will refresh our *nefesh*, our soul

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REFERENCE

Gordon, Gil. (2001). *Turn it off*. New York: Three Rivers.