



Women's Whispers: Stay-at-work (kollel) wife

Between [my stay-at-home husband] and the paratrooper-turned-cleaner, the children are secure, and most days the house stands right-side up.





religious family 521
(photo credit: Lydia Polimeni)

By VIVA HAMMER
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Four men were tending the home when I left for work today: my father, a mathematician, businessman and Holocaust survivor; the cleaner, a decorated IDF paratrooper; my stay-at-home spouse; and our home-schooled son. I am told that people talk behind my back. They envy me for orchestrating a perfect work-life balance and for finding a New Age Man who agreed to stay at home when I took a job, which required him to give up his. They consider us a model for the modern family.

What would I tell them if they addressed themselves to my face? Work is a sacrament for my father. He grew up in a poor Hungarian town, where the family prospered until their clothing business burned down. If he studied hard, he could become a teacher and earn a living that wouldn't be incinerated in one night. If he studied harder, he might be admitted to the rabbinical seminary and avoid the draft.

The shop fire was the first disaster; it was followed by the Nazi deportation, a decade of Stalinist terror and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution from which the family escaped to the free world, leaving behind everything they had earned. After each disaster, the family dug itself up from the rubble in a swirl of hard labor. With work, they earned their physical sustenance, a rhythm and purpose. "Arbeit macht frei!" my father instructed me. "What a shame the Germans stole the expression."



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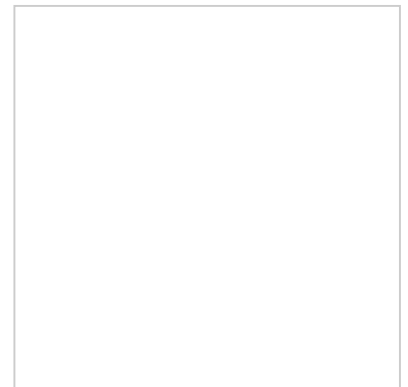
We grew up on the fruits of my father's labor; it was a jealous master. Ignorant of the lush prosperity cushioning us in the lucky country, we worked, saved and

spent as if some calamity were imminent. There was no romance in labor, but it was made clear to me that those who didn't do it, didn't live.

I landed my first job in New York during a deep recession and developed a chronic fear of being sacked.

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While incubating this neonate career, I was introduced to Aaron. Ten years he toiled in kollel and was awarded with spiritual leadership of a congregation that prided itself on never paying a penny. But even after becoming engaged, I didn't bother my pretty head over what earning prospects my fiancé had. Hadn't God promised man he would earn bread by the sweat of his brow? We married, and bread-winning devolved upon me.



Confused (perhaps he had skipped Bible class?), I suggested that Aaron find a position that rewarded its employees with profane currency. In disbelief at my temerity, he resisted. In disbelief at his resistance, I suggested again at a higher pitch. Seething at my demands, he began a course in psychotherapy because he "liked helping people." But he returned from class in a depressed rage: He had been drilled since infancy that pondering the Talmud was the sole appropriate occupation for a Jewish man, and this was certainly not Talmud.

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I found his attitude unfathomable. Where I come from, if you don't earn your bread, you're a parasite.

He had been taught if you don't study holy text every moment, you're a shtinker.

As we battled across the unbridgable divide, I discovered I was pregnant and panicked into a new job adequate for the three of us. The boss was erratic and demanding, alternately yelling and whining. As he blew cigarette smoke into my face, I assured him of his greatness, cowered under his abuses. Ashamed of my manifest fertility, I rode myself to exhaustion.

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In a lull between client calls, the baby arrived. She bewitched me; I sobbed at the idea of abandoning her for work. But finding no ad for free room and board, I gagged my feelings, interviewed nannies, returned to the desk and pumped

breast milk. Aaron was at school every night and, after working like a fiend, it was I who had to rush home to relieve the nanny.

Soon after I returned from maternity leave, the yelling-smoking boss quit and my stock soared. A headhunter lured me into another job. When I informed my supervisor, he promised me a 50 percent raise.

"They'll get back every cent – with your blood," my father warned.

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Meanwhile, Aaron had started his first job; his reaction to the news was red-hot anger. "If your raise is bigger than my entire salary, what's the point of my working?" I rolled my eyes. "You have to start somewhere, you know. Then you climb the ladder until one day you can support me!" For a kollel boy, the idea of working up from the bottom was unfathomable: Either you're on welfare or you're a millionaire.

All day I scribbled memos, answered calls, pumped breast milk. All night I nursed.

I became pregnant again and was up for another promotion.

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Aaron was still working endless hours for ridiculously low pay; I was still rushing home to take the night shift.

Then, weeks before the baby was due, our nanny abandoned us. I felt my heart had been ripped out.

Bereft, I booked my daughter into emergency daycare.

It was real corporate style, with no windows or walls, and a rotating staff that consistently rendered the company's trademarked brand of rudeness.

I delivered the baby, was promoted again, and every day away I rifled through the cascading mail, terrified that the business I had worked so hard to build would be pilfered, or fritter away.

Aaron suggested I return to work part time.

"I don't do anything by parts. It's all or nothing; I'd prefer nothing if anyone is offering that," I said.

Aaron's salary still couldn't cover much more than the gas bill, so I plunged back into work. Another boss quit, and suddenly I was the point person in a huge company for a key product. Clients flapped around in crisis, and I rose on the wings of eagles to appease them. Sometimes I brought the family, and sometimes just the breast pump. Building a staff, I felt most comfortable with

females around me. While I had been the sole pregnant woman in my department when I began, at the department meetings I now ran, I was the sole woman not pregnant. The pressure was enormous. I had grown from junior staff to firm leader, all the while gestating, birthing and raising my children. At work, there were revenue goals, budgets and obligations to the team. At home, I still nursed the children, dealt with touchy nannies, cooked, cleaned and kept the peace.

In the middle of the journey of my life, I came to myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost – Dante's Inferno Canto I.

And it came to pass according to my father's prophesy: They took my blood in pints. No meals, no sunlight, no exercise, no rest – nothing except desk work, home work, pump work. I had been branded with the curse not just of Eve but of Adam, too. Clearly there had been some mistake.

Arbeit macht frei was a bitter deception. Work was not giving me freedom; it was enslaving me. Aaron was not going to redeem me, either. He didn't have the drive, the salesmanship you need to earn a living. Raised in the kollel system, he had come too late to the career game, had never been taught the rules. It was absurd, he thought, that I drove myself into the ground to pay the rent. Why didn't I just go part time? After much scheming, I was offered a government appointment in Washington. The invitation was the highest honor, but not one that I coveted: I wanted the job of stay-at-home mom. Still, the job meant Aaron could stop working, and there would be no more nannies.

So here I am, a working woman with stay-at-home men. My husband is a fastidious house spouse.

Between him and the paratrooper-turned-cleaner, the children are secure, and most days the house stands right-side up.

Women hold the majority in the American workforce today. Haredim were harbingers of the trend; there, women are around 100 percent of the workforce. And the men? Certainly not on the payrolls or roll calls; other than that, who knows? House spouses, perhaps?

"Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work... For in six days God made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in it" (Exodus 20:8-11).

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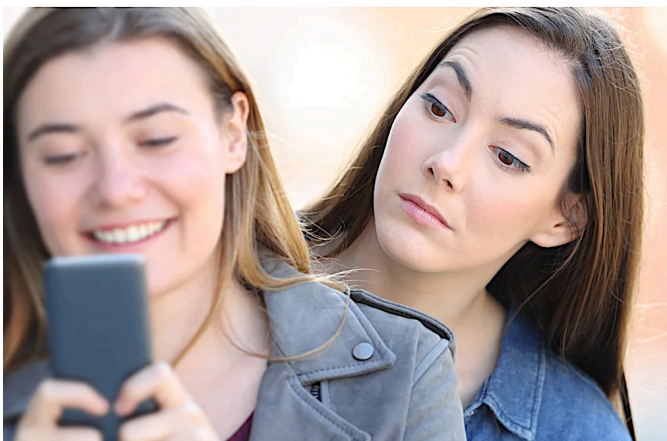
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