Overwhelmed. Exhausted. Stressed. Somewhat surprisingly, few of the women we interviewed for our cover story on balancing career and family used the words above to describe their very full lives. This is not to say that they are happy and fulfilled all of the time, that they never feel torn or conflicted, and that they don’t feel the stress of living harried lives (carpool at 7:45 am, catch an 8:31 train to Manhattan). But the reality is that many frum women work full time, for a variety of reasons, and find immense fulfillment and satisfaction in building Torah-true families while contributing to society in other ways as well.

Here are writer Barbara Bensoussan’s impressions after interviewing some of these remarkable women:

Meeting so many accomplished, exceptional women, even over the phone, was a humbling and enriching experience. Very few of us, myself included, are able to maintain such high levels of professional productivity while simultaneously assuring that no duty on the home or family front gets neglected. What is their secret? As I conducted the interviews, a few common threads emerged.

For starters, the most high-powered interviewees seemed to possess an extraordinary level of physical vitality. They also appear capable of functioning on a minimal amount of sleep. Lydia Kess was a very athletic teenager, and Jessica Jacob says she learned to forgo sleep in medical school (and continues to get up at 4:30 in the morning to work out on the StairMaster, even after nighttime baby deliveries).

Some of that vitality appears to derive from something else these women have in common: a passion for their work. These are women who clearly find joy and satisfaction in their chosen professions. Instead of being depleted by their work, they feel energized and fulfilled by it. Dr. Jacob cheerfully says she doesn’t take vacations, but she doesn’t care; she’s very happy just to be living the life she’s chosen. Anne Neuberger says her husband sometimes has to remind her to come home. Lydia Kess likened her work in law to doing challenging puzzles.

These women have largely been blessed with low-maintenance husbands who support their wives’ careers. Consistent, reliable household and babysitting help is also crucial. Housework is the first thing to be outsourced, being an area where a Jewish mother can most painlessly be replaced. All these women do their own cooking, but they are quick to avow that they make simple recipes and rarely fuss.

Most of them admit that the biggest challenge is finding quality time not with their children, but with spouses. A job makes its demands loudly and clearly, and children always manage to pull their mothers to their sides. But we tend to assume that our independent adult spouses are fine if left to themselves. This is an assumption, however, that these women are smart enough to recognize as unsound.

They’re also quick to admit to the personal sacrifices. If you want to devote many hours to a demanding career, but refuse to stint on family time, what is usually sacrificed is “me” time: making time for friends, going to simchahs in the evening, pursuing hobbies.

Children, work, spouse—there’s no time for much else when you take all those roles seriously. But the takeaway is that if you deeply love what you do, you can wear the burden of a career lightly, and come home not drained, but brimming over with enthusiasm.

Please note that, where requested, names and identifying information have been changed to ensure anonymity.
It's hard with all the expectations we live with these days. Everyone has ideas about how a young woman should spend her time, and whatever she does, there's no shortage of voices telling her she's making the wrong choice—even if they are just the voices inside her own head.

I've held many different positions over the course of my career, and the rhythm was different for each job. When I started out, I worked as a teacher. I had a morning babysitter and all my motherly and housekeeping duties took place in the afternoon and evening. Then I started graduate school. My children were young and would go to sleep at a certain time; then I would leave to attend classes. But that didn't last long! With school-aged kids, family time in the evening is important, so I would often go back to work late at night. In New York, commuting takes time. It makes more sense to do work at home when it spills over from standard office hours, which in my line of work, it almost always does. As your kids get older, it is very important to set aside time on a regular basis to “schmooze” with each child individually.

Needless to say, there's no way I did everything. If any woman thinks that she can do everything to perfection without help—parenting, running a household, living a Torah lifestyle, being a good neighbor and friend and working outside the home—she's going to be very unhappy, because there's no way any human being can hold herself to that kind of standard. Some things just won't happen, and I feel better making that choice consciously rather than be disappointed in myself for not reaching unrealistic goals.

I have a very supportive husband who did, and still does, pitch in and help. We don't stand on ceremony about who does what; he's a very involved father. I also use as much cleaning help as I can afford. I've learned to improvise when I don't have time for the perfect outcome, and my sons cook.

As individuals, I think we would be healthier if, instead of looking at all the things we're not doing, we would focus on the things we are doing, and honor and embrace the values and commitments that are driving our decisions. There's only a limited amount of time in the day, and when you choose to say “yes” to something, you are also making the choice not to do something else. We all have to take responsibility for that, understand what drives us and make choices we can explain to ourselves—not to others. I often have to re-
mind myself that the reason I am not in one place is because I have chosen to be in another place at that moment. In our minds we have to be where we are, not where we aren’t.

If you’re going to contribute to the world and society through a job, that takes time, and that time needs to be deducted from other things you would like to do, like be a class mother. I’m proud that I was able to support my husband while he was learning seventeen years in kollel. It was a lot of work, but it was extremely important to me and, of course, to him.

Sure, it’s harder for observant women in some ways. We tend to want to have larger families, so when you talk about the “Mommy track,” you’re not simply talking about taking off a couple of years for one child, maybe two. You are talking about benefiting from flexibility at work for years. Those child crises, doctors’ appointments, calls from school . . . there are just more of them. Also, Shabbos and yom tov are wonderful berachos—when else would we disconnect if not for Shabbos and yom tov?—but they take an enormous amount of time to prepare, shop for, cook and clean up . . . especially if you want to have guests in your home, which I do. Mishloach manos, making simchahs, there’s a lot that we observant women do.

Food and vacations are what people supposedly recall most about their childhoods. Cooking and baking certain yom tov foods means a lot to my children, so I prioritize that. But I don’t feel bad about buying potato kugel for Shabbos, and I don’t bake challah every week.

I’m one of those people who need solitude at times, some “alone” time to just think, whether it’s about my professional responsibilities, my family or my spiritual development. I actually don’t mind commuting to work because I use that time to ponder all the things I need to think about.

Yes, there are things that, over the course of my career, I could not do professionally, or rather, chose not to do, because of my familial obligations. For instance, when I was a school principal, I wasn’t able to greet the students at the door at 8:00 in the morning like the male principals often do after minyan; I was busy getting my own kids ready for school. There were deadlines I missed over the years, conferences I didn’t attend, offers I declined and calls that took longer to return because a child was in crisis or illness struck.

My work in chinuch is tremendously important to me. I give it my all and I care deeply about the quality of what I do. But bringing children into the world is the biggest commitment you can possibly make. Both work and home life are unpredictable; and as a Jew and a mother, there is no question that family takes priority. Usually I do not find them in conflict. I work very hard and I’m becoming better over the years about being realistic and communicating boundaries. I believe that what I bring to the table professionally outweighs any limitations due to my family commitments—at least I hope so. And being a parent, spouse and rebetzin does bring wisdom and perspective over time—wisdom that only enhances the work I do.

Part of me wishes we weren’t still having these same conversations about women balancing work and home, as if it is our problem and it comes down to women’s choices. This is about families. Dual income is not always optional. And we know that children need their fathers as well as their mothers, and men need balance in their lives too.

It’s pretty shocking that in a community that is so family-oriented, our communal organizations are certainly not ahead, and perhaps are even behind, when it comes to accommodating working mothers. The rest of the world is recognizing the economic advantage of keeping their best employees—parents or not. We also have a communal stake in the well-being of our families. True, our organizations are often operating on shoestring budgets. But not every accommodation costs money. We need to lead in this area, not lag behind.

Maternity leave is not the only issue; let’s remember that being a mother does not end when a child is no longer an infant. And what about giving fathers some time off to help out with new babies? Making adjustments for a new baby when there are two working parents takes longer than six weeks.

Even though they may not be as visible as pregnancy, there are all kinds of family obligations and priorities. There are many ways workplaces can become more family-friendly, such as offering flextime and the ability to work from home and promotions based on performance rather than face time at the office. These are not charitable concessions. We need to remember the costs of frequent turnover and the inability to attract and retain the most competent professionals—some of whom are definitely mothers.

Here’s another idea to consider: when does the workday end? We need to be firmer about saying that we are unavailable to answer e-mails or take phone calls between say, 5:00 PM and 8:00 PM. Establishing such boundaries shouldn’t be seen as a sign of weakness, but as a sign of having clear priorities and setting aside enough time to be able to focus on our families. In our Jewish organizations, this should be the norm if we want to do something good for the next generation.

There isn’t really one right or wrong way to do things, or one particular formula that’s helpful for everyone. We are all works in progress, trying to serve Hashem in the best way possible. My advice is to make sure you’re attuned to your own self, know your limits and cut yourself some slack.
Etti
AS TOLD TO AZRIELA JAFFE

FORTY-THREE-YEAR-OLD ETTI, a scientist originally from Toronto, lives in Baltimore with her husband of twenty-four years and their five children, ranging in age from thirteen to twenty-one.

I have a problem with the idea that a woman must give up an intellectually stimulating career just because she’s become a mother. With all of the electronic tools we have available to us today, there is plenty of flexibility in work situations. So why would any woman need to turn off her ambition? I am, by nature, a curious person, and am always learning. Hashem gave me unusual interests and, baruch Hashem, provided me with a spouse who has done nothing but encourage me to explore my potential. He is a superdad and superhusband.

I knew from a young age that I wanted a career in science, even as a traditional frum girl who attended BJJ [Beth Jacob Jerusalem] Seminary. I was different from many of my friends who came home from seminary eager to marry kollel boys, though I ended up marrying one.

My husband learned in kollel for nine years and received semichah from Rabbi Moshe Heinemann in Baltimore. He began teaching in the local girls’ school while completing his graduate degree. At the time, I was completing my graduate research. The blessings of Rochester were manifold, including proximity to the university and a wonderful nanny who arrived promptly at 7:30 every morning and stayed with our children until 3:30. Because of our nanny who worked for us for five years, I knew that our children were well cared for when I wasn’t there.

In 2000, we moved to Baltimore with five children under the age of ten, the youngest only a baby. We chose Baltimore because my husband was familiar with the area and it seemed to be a perfect “cradle-to-grave” community. Moving with children is emotionally and physically exhausting, and we didn’t want to ever have to move again. Daniel Aaron began a career in training and development and I worked in a demanding fellowship at Johns Hopkins. In a fellowship, you spend long hours in the lab in a “publish or perish” environment, and you are also expected to train other students, present cutting-edge data and network with professionals all over the world.

Even though the fellowship was very demanding with a sixty-hour-a-week commitment, it gave me the independence I needed to balance work demands with family. I was given the freedom to get the job done—however I could—and that sometimes took creativity. I did not have a great childcare situation when we first moved to Baltimore. We hired babysitters, and I had a
good nanny helping me for some of the
time, but it wasn’t like it was in
Rochester. I needed to be home for the
older children when they came home
from school, so I had to plan my lab
time and experiments very carefully. I
often worked from the wee hours of
the morning, leaving for the lab after
middle-of-the-night baby feedings.

If I had a twelve-hour experiment I
had to do on a Friday, I’d start work at
3 AM so I could finish in time for Shab-
bos. During the week I was a full-time
mom to my kids in the late afternoon
and evening. Sometimes I would return
to the lab late at night; sometimes I
would bring my kids with me to the
lab. They grew up viewing mixing DNA
and proteins in the lab as straightforwardly as they viewed baking a cake in
the kitchen.

In 2004, I left Johns Hopkins to
help run a software company working
on translational medicine, a job that re-
quired extensive travel. I had to coordi-
nate carefully with my husband, who at
the time often worked from home.

My workdays are often long and
demanding, but the beauty of my pro-
fession is that I’m not locked into a set
schedule. When my husband needs to
travel, I make sure I’m home, and
when I need to travel, I depend on him
to be home.

Maybe I’ve missed a PTA meeting,
but I could always talk to the teacher
on the phone if I needed to. I’ve always
made sure to never miss anything im-
portant in our children’s lives, be it a
school play or a birthday party.

Now that our children have out-
grown the need for babysitting, we are
in a different phase of our family’s life.
My husband and I really enjoy the
adults our children are becoming.

I currently work from home in an
executive advisory capacity, and collab-
orate with physicians and surgeons to
develop and commercialize new ther-
pies and diagnostic tools and medical
devices. I help to create and run clini-
cal trials and I enjoy contributing my
knowledge as a medical scientist not
only to the cancer field, but to a wide
array of other diseases as well. A home-
based office gives me an even greater
degree of flexibility than I had before.

On Shabbos, guests at our table
would never know how many hours
I’ve devoted to work all week long.
Our chicken is baked on Friday after-
noon, our kishke made fresh and we
have homemade chicken soup.

I’m not going to say that there
haven’t been trade-offs. For example,
in graduate school I rarely attended
the professional networking meetings
my colleagues had at 5 PM, and I did
not present at scientific conferences
until my last child was born. My time
is precious, so I must use it wisely. My
to-do list is pages long, and it might
take me a while to cross items off that
list. But the bottom line is that I
wouldn’t make any other decision. I
love my work, and feel that my life is
full and everyone in our family has
benefitted from my commitment to my
profession. I don’t even try to convince
my daughters that a field in science is
also open to them—they are naturally
drawn to it like their mother.

In a fellowship, you spend long hours in the lab in a “publish
or perish” environment . . . and you are expected to present
data and network with professionals all over the world.
Ever since I was a young girl, I wanted to deliver babies, or at least do something related to pregnancy and childbirth. Maybe it’s because my mother always spoke about how giving birth is the most wonderful experience.

I grew up in a very traditional home with a stay-at-home mom. In fact, my mother made it very clear that she disapproves of women who work—she believes many women work to avoid staying home with their kids. When I went into medicine, she was initially quite disapproving. Now she’s come around—but ironically, it was she who inspired me to pursue this field in the first place!

I didn’t have any role models for being a professional woman; I had to blaze my own path. As a mother, I had models: my own mother, and especially my grandmother, who was the most tender, loving and giving person. She lived very simply, but if she knew I was coming she would run to prepare a steak or a pot of chicken soup. Her example instilled in me the drive to always be there for my kids and the willingness to go the extra mile for them.

I have a twin brother, who was being groomed to be a doctor. As I had done very well in school, I thought, Hey, I could do this too! It wasn’t an idea born out of rebellion or competition; it was a means to realize my childhood dream of bringing babies into the world.

I finished NYU School of Medicine in 1983, and took a residency at North Shore Hospital in Long Island. After that I began working in a private practice which accommodated my need to be off on Shabbos and Yom Tov; all of my seven children were born during those years. When the practice could no longer accommodate my Shabbos needs, I opened my own practice.

Currently, I have a very large and busy solo practice; I deliver around 600 babies a year! We live in Great Neck, and the hospital is only about three miles from the house, allowing me to constantly shuttle back and forth.

Obstetrics today is so awful—there are so many C-sections because doctors are afraid of getting sued, and because they’re no longer making the kind of money that would motivate them to go the extra mile for patients. But I say, “Forget the lawyers; just do what’s right for the patient!” This profession is a calling, and you have to do your best by your patients.

I find my work extraordinarily gratifying and feel a tremendous responsibility to my patients. I’m on call all the time—day and night. My son got married a few weeks ago, and I worked every night right up until the wedding, and then came back to Great Neck from Baltimore that same night because I had patients who needed me.

Babies tend to come at night, so when my kids were younger they didn’t notice my absences so much. I could deliver a baby and still be home in the morning to get them out to school. Fortunately, getting by on no sleep is a skill I developed in medical school (I also drink lots of coffee).
Most mornings I’m up by 4:45 to work out on the StairMaster. Do I like exercise? No, I hate it! But it gives me energy, and I read medical journals or listen to shiurim on my iPod while I exercise.

My kids loved having a mommy who delivered babies—they would bask in the attention they would receive from teachers and mothers whose children had been delivered by me. When they were little, I had full-time babysitting and household help. I was willing to pay more than the going rate to ensure a stable environment for my children. Of course when my kids were young, there were some crazy moments. I remember June being an especially overwhelming month between the graduations and camp physicals and packing kids for camp.

I used to take care of clothing shopping by doing a few big trips a year, in which we would buy everything. I never allowed shopping to become recreational, an activity. Shopping can eat up incredible amounts of time and energy—personally, I can think of so many other ways I prefer to allocate my energies.

I remember that teachers would give tons of homework and projects that needed a parent’s participation, and it was very difficult for me to deal with all the dioramas and projects. I would think, Don’t the teachers understand that a mother can’t spend hours working with each child? I somehow muddled through, but I wished teachers could be more understanding of working mothers. I often did homework over the phone with my kids from the doctors’ lounge.

We still have two kids at home, a seventeen-year-old who recently left to learn in Eretz Yisrael and a twenty-five-year-old daughter who needs to live at home due to medical issues. And now we are actually back to raising little kids again since one of our daughters divorced and moved back in with us with her three little boys, aged six, five and two, while she finishes her residency in maxillofacial surgery. She’s so busy that my husband and I see the kids more than she does.

I’ve always carefully guarded my quality moments with my children.

Last year, when I knew my son would be leaving in the fall for Israel, we used to have dinner together every night. My married daughter who lives in Washington Heights will often come over and we’ll have coffee together. I find that even grown children still need us so much.

For most of our married life, my husband had a very high-pressure Wall Street career. But he recently retired and is now able to lead the life he always wanted, attending every minyan and learning much of the time. He’s with friends. It used to be extremely frustrating for me when there was some school event that may have been important to my kids but wasn’t important enough that I could arrange for coverage at work. I would feel terrible missing it, but I knew if I started taking off for the little things, it would all come apart. Did I want to go help my daughter pick out her wedding dress when she was a kallah? Of course I did! But she managed on her own, and sent pictures to my phone as she shopped.

I don’t have time for hobbies, except a little gardening. We don’t take vacations, because I can’t leave my patients for very long. I do a lot of chesed in my line of work, but I don’t have any time to pack boxes for Tomchei Shabbos or attend dinners for yeshivos or tzedakahs.

I do love going to shul on Shabbos. Shul is really my only social outlet outside of work and family, and it’s my spiritual outlet also.

My married kids come to us often for Shabbosim, but I don’t ask them for help. I like having control of my own kitchen, and I don’t want to burden my children with anything. I don’t want my kids to ever feel they are deprived because they have a mother who works. At his sheva berachos, my son gave a speech where he said he never felt that his mother worked because I managed to always be there for him. That’s exactly what I’ve tried to achieve.

The real trick to juggling everything is to be able to multitask. You have to be able to weave the different parts of your life together; move from one space to the other, without making a big partition between them. I’ve gone on rounds with my children and grandchildren in tow; I’ve given advice to my newlywed son about which restaurant to go to with his wife while pressing on a woman’s stomach. You have to be passionate about what you do, and be willing to sacrifice for it; many people are too caught up in wanting their “me” time.

Despite all the things I give up in my life, I feel extremely fulfilled. I love what I do and love being with my family so much that I don’t feel I’m missing out on much else.

I don’t want my kids to ever feel they are deprived because they have a mother who works.
Amy Katz

AMY KATZ OF BROOKLINE, Massachusetts, is the executive director of the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education, a Boston-based nonprofit organization dedicated to helping Jewish day schools across North America achieve financial sustainability. A graduate of Stern College for Women and the Wurzweiler School of Social Work of Yeshiva University, Amy has served the Jewish community for more than three decades as a strategic planner, program developer, nonprofit operations manager, staff supervisor and fundraising professional. She and her husband, Nathan, have five children and three grandchildren.

I was working full-time before I took time off to have my first child. I had just earned my master’s degree and was building up my career and resume. Suddenly, I had to put the brakes on my career. I did not expect to have to do that. Going from professional woman to professional mom was an adjustment.

There is this expectation that women can have it all—but that’s a myth. When you’re raised to believe that you can have it all though, it’s very shocking when you realize that you can’t. I started working during the “second stage” of the Women’s Movement, when Betty Friedan put forth the idea that women cannot have it all, not without certain changes taking place. But many women of my generation had already been ingrained with the idea that working and raising a family at the same time was both possible and desirable.

No woman, and for that matter, no man, can have it all. We live in a world with a lot of opportunities, but we have to make certain sacrifices.

When I was younger, most of my friends didn’t need to work. Today, most young women work either because of economic reasons or because they are pursuing careers—some very high-powered, time-consuming careers and others less demanding ones. We live in a world that is very focused on professional success and achievement. It’s hard not to get caught up in that. Orthodox women are expected to do everything and the pressure is intense.

Early in my career, I worked at a Jewish community center overseeing children’s programs. An older woman once applied for a position, but she had not worked since college. I simply couldn’t hire her without any experience. I went home thinking, Oh my goodness—that could be me. No one will hire me in fifteen years! However, there are ways to build your professional profile even if you decide to take time off to raise your children. Maintain some level of professional involvement, whether it’s part-time, freelance or volunteer work. Stay involved and do not expect the company to be there waiting for you.

I have been very lucky, professionally speaking. I was able to grow my career over the last thirty-three years despite taking significant time off when I had each of my children and working part-time when my children were young.

At one point I worked at Combined Jewish Philanthropies, Boston’s Jewish federation, and took a year off when my fifth child was born. When I went back to full-time work, my oldest was thirteen. My husband traveled a lot for work, and even with full-time help, I felt as if I was being strangled. I
would get into my car to drive to work and scream because the pressure was enormous. It was hard for me to admit that I needed to switch to part-time. I began working three days a week for the next few years until my children were a little older. I did not work on Fridays—from Thursday night to Monday morning. I didn’t have to think about work. Of course that’s changed these days with e-mail and the expectation that one must be available around the clock.

Balancing work and motherhood is not only an issue when your children are younger. When children are older, it’s more challenging because there is much more at stake; the decisions and issues are potentially life altering. If you are not there when your teenagers need you, they will look for guidance elsewhere—perhaps not always in the most constructive places. When I became associate director at PEJE ten years ago, my children were teenagers. I used flextime and came into work late one day a week. At home, we always regard dinner hour as sacred and I use that time as an opportunity to connect with my kids and husband. Similarly, we view Shabbos and Sunday as family time. On Shabbos, we reserve one meal just for family. The other meal we might have guests, but one meal is just for us.

Currently, as executive director of PEJE, I travel a lot. From Pesach to Shavuos this past year, I was probably traveling for two or three days out of every week. I have many women on my staff and I try to extend the same flexibility I was given to them. If one of their children is sick, or has a school play, the mother has the option of working from home. I know firsthand how absolutely necessary flexibility is to a working mom.

My jobs in Jewish communal organizations have always been yotzei min haklal (very much the exception) in being accommodating to a working mom. How can you talk about Jewish values and not adjust your organizations and institutions to reflect those values? That’s puzzling to me. The Jewish world needs to respect the fact that women have a lot to offer; their jobs need to be managed differently and accommodations need to be made. The fact that there are not more Orthodox women in leadership positions in Jewish organizations is one of the results of organizations not supporting younger women who are trying to balance their personal and professional lives. A staff member at the Avi Chai Foundation recently blogged about how the Foundation made accommodations for a number of young women who asked for their work schedules to be adapted to better fit the lives of working mothers. With kudos to Avi Chai, that’s unfortunately an unusual occurrence. More Jewish organizations, especially Orthodox ones, need to value the skills and assets that women bring and consider how to make the workplace and the work environment more flexible, inviting and accommodating to working mothers.

There is this expectation that women can have it all—but that’s a myth.
I was born in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, in 1935 during the Depression. At the time, my mother was on a waiting list to become a public school teacher (she couldn’t work because she was expecting—in those days, you couldn’t get a job if you were pregnant).

Back then, students were allowed to skip grades, so I started high school by age eleven and college by age fifteen. I chose to major in accounting. I didn’t particularly enjoy it, but I did what was deemed necessary.

It was difficult for women in the job market during that time. Long after the male seniors who were C students had found jobs, I was still looking. I was finally hired as a junior accountant at PricewaterhouseCoopers LLC. Women were not welcome, and I was placed in the small business department. The first day I walked into the office, a colleague said to me, “We saved all the lousy jobs for you!” He was right—they had.

At the time, well-recognized schools such as New York University did not offer scholarships to women. But in 1956 I was awarded a full scholarship to Brooklyn Law School. After my first year of law school, I married an accountant, proceeded to have three girls in a three-year period and continued in the evening division while being a stay-at-home mom during the day. (If you didn’t finish law school in six years, you would be required to start all over again, so I made sure to finish within that time.)

I loved law school; it was exciting and interesting. I graduated at the top of my class, but the school had no placement office at the time. Since the major law firms were located on Wall Street during the 1960s, I rode up and down the elevators in Manhattan for six months looking for work. Hashem performed a miracle and Davis Polk hired me, despite the fact that I seemed like an oddball: I was born and lived in Brooklyn, I was a woman and I had three kids. In spite of its reputation as a white-shoe firm, Davis Polk was meritocracy-based, and many people whose ancestors didn’t come over on the Mayflower have risen through the ranks.

After a few years at Davis Polk, I became pregnant with my son. In those days, the firm did not offer maternity leave and I was afraid to say anything. I knew that secretaries who became pregnant were dismissed, but I was the first woman attorney at the firm to have a baby. I wore black and navy suits, in larger and larger sizes, trying to hide [the pregnancy]. Then one day I fainted in the elevator. I woke up in the company’s infirmary to find the partners standing over me looking deeply concerned. I had to confess, “I’m not sick; I’m just pregnant!”

A few years earlier, a male colleague had taken a sick leave. So I mustered up my courage, went to my supervisors and told them it would only be fair to compensate me during my leave. Fortunately, they agreed.

After I started at Davis Polk, I hired an Irish nanny with a charming brogue to run the household and care for the children when they came home from school. She was on duty from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM, with overtime when it was...
necessary for me to stay late at the office. After my son was born, caring for him was added to her full-time responsibilities. A year later, a dear friend who had a large family stepped into the picture. She appreciated the extra income, so I brought my son to her home and she looked after him; my girls went to her house after school. This arrangement continued until my children reached their teens. Her apartment was a home away from home for them. The love, ehrlichkeit and Yiddishkeit in her home were treasures and blessings for them and me. Our families are extremely close to this day.

My colleagues were ethical, brilliant, helpful people. They would cover for me on Shabbos and yom tov without complaining. One summer, my colleagues and I were involved in a merger involving two companies with an aggregate value of several billion dollars. We had to determine if the transaction would be tax free, and we needed to make a decision before the opening of the London Stock Exchange on Monday morning. Because of the late Shabbos, my colleagues made the meeting Motzaei Shabbos at 11:00 PM just to accommodate me. Many of my colleagues came in from Westchester, Connecticut and New Jersey, and we met from 11:00 PM until 4:00 AM.

It was an enormous plus that I found my work so fascinating. I loved looking at a situation and trying to accomplish what the business needed and what the corporate lawyers required. It was like a chess game, where you have to know the rules and the dynamics. It was a challenge, but it was so satisfying that it never felt like a burden.

In 1983, I married my second husband, Shalom, a widower with three children who had survived the war as a boy. Shalom’s beautiful middos enchanted everyone he came into contact with, including me. He had first been in the needle trade when he came to America, then manufacturing, but after our marriage he started learning full-time. Together we created a beautiful combined family.

Making sure all my responsibilities were taken care of was a constant challenge. I wrote lists and lists! I developed a few techniques to save myself mental and emotional energy. I created standardized menus so I knew what I was serving each day of the week. I even had an outfit for each day of the week, plus a few spares, to minimize time and effort in the morning. On Thursday nights I got very little sleep and would cook and clean, because everything had to be ready for Shabbos before I left for work in the morning. I felt so uncomfor-
able leaving colleagues in the middle of things on Friday—the best part of retirement is not having those Friday conflicts anymore!

Hashem blessed me with deep reservoirs of energy. In my day, there was no such thing as telecommuting, so I would sometimes come home from work at 5:00 PM, put the kids to bed, then go back to work until five in the morning. Then I would come home, get the kids off to school and go back to work. But not everybody can handle such a physically taxing schedule. You shouldn’t feel guilty or like a failure if you’re not able to function at full capacity on almost zero sleep.

I did certain things to stay close to my kids. When they were little, I would record stories for them to listen to. When they went to sleep-away camp, pre-cell phone days, I would buy stacks of post cards and send them one every day.

My time with my husband is always quality time. He’s so easy to bond with and always ready to offer something inspiring he discovered in his learning. His conversation is never trivial—it expands my horizons far beyond how to do a merger. He manages to make me feel cared for, that I am treasured.

Today my husband and I are retired. We live in Eretz Yisrael, but we travel frequently to the US to see family.

If there’s a message I want to leave for today’s young women, it’s this: you’re out in the workplace, you want to use your talents, you want recognition. But know that your real raison d’etre is to be a kiddush Hashem, to use your job as an opportunity to show others what it means to be an Orthodox Jew. It’s especially important for Orthodox women, since the world is convinced that we’re oppressed.

My husband always emphasizes that everyone in the workplace should be careful not to be a “Friday afternoon Jew.” In other words, your behavior throughout the week should be what marks you as a Jew, not the fact that you leave early on Friday afternoon.

And while a job has to give “reasonable accommodation” to your religious beliefs, be aware that many of the colleagues who are working those hours you’re off on Shabbos and yom tov have no idea what your norms are—for all they know, you’re at the beach or shopping. I’m talking about decent, well-meaning, Ivy League-educated people.

Don’t avoid the company cafeteria because it’s not kosher; they’ll think you’re snobbish. Go have a Coke or eat a banana, but be with them. Listen to them even if they’re talking about football. Show that you care about them as people; ask about their kids. You might not change an anti-Semite, but at least you won’t add fuel to his fire. Mostly you’ll benefit the klal, and make your own life more pleasant as well.

I would also like to see young frum men advance their secular education, preferably before marriage. Many are growing up in a kind of bubble in their yeshivos, with no appreciation of the realities of life.

I once heard Rabbi Moshe Aharon Stern, zt”l, the mashgiach of the Kaminetz Yeshiva in Jerusalem, say during a shiur that a husband needs to develop the three A’s—appreciation, admiration and attention—for a marriage to work and be joyous. A man has to recognize the significance of his wife. He has to realize that clean clothes and well-raised children aren’t his due; they don’t happen by magic. A woman can be happy scrubbing pots, as long as she feels valued.
I chose to enter the field of special education even though I majored in computer science as an undergraduate. I couldn’t really see myself working in an office and knew I enjoyed working with kids, so I decided to pursue a graduate degree that would enable me to work with children.

I have to be at work at 8:20 A.M. so my husband, who is self-employed as a computer technician and works from home, gets our four-year-old daughter and three-year-old son off to school in the morning. I’m very lucky that he is able to do this; it’s very challenging for families when both parents work full-time outside of the home—I don’t know how they manage.

I work until 3:00 P.M., so I’m able to pick up my kids from preschool. I opt out of carpool since I want to spend some alone time with my children in the car. My husband usually works on Sundays so I try to plan fun activities to do with the kids. Bedtime is another opportunity for me to bond with them. My daughter is mature enough to really talk to me before bedtime and tell me about her day and about things that may be bothering her; I cherish this time we have together.

When it comes to Shabbos preparation, my husband is a big help. He takes over a lot of the shopping and most of the cleaning and cooking. We decide our Shabbos and yom tov menus in advance. We have sleepover guests for Shabbos about once a month, and we often invite neighborhood friends for Shabbos meals.

I don’t go out at night often. Much of my social life takes place online—e-mail and Facebook, et cetera. I’m fortunate that I have made friends at my workplace too, where there are a lot of young, similarly-minded people.

Since my husband is self-employed and can make his own schedule, we have a real advantage over other working couples. We get to see each other at random points throughout the day and early evening. The downside is that he’s also “on call” at all hours. We don’t have an official date night, but we will often plan a lunch date during a legal holiday when both he and I are off and the kids have school.

I would love to see a Jewish daycare that accommodates working parents—open from seven in the morning until six or seven in the evening. The daycare should cater to elementary-age children so that if there is a day off or school ends early, daycare is an option. Maybe the local schools could provide such a service—have a few teachers come early or stay late for after-school care. Right now, the schools seem to work around the schedules of women who work locally or part-time or don’t work at all. The school schedule is impossibly challenging for full-time working parents. I think there’s enough of a need that such a venture could be really successful.

Tova Ross is a communications specialist for Yeshiva University and a freelance writer. She lives in New Jersey with her family.
I’m due to have a baby soon, im yirtzeh Hashem, and will have to go back to work after a six-week maternity leave. Even though my husband is a very hands-on father, I know it’s going to be very hard for me to manage. I believe that juggling career and family is doable, but children have to be a priority. Workplaces also have to realize that ensuring that mothers have flexibility is to everyone’s benefit. The school I work at is very accommodating. My boss understands that if my child has a Chumash play or it’s the first day of school, I’m going to come in late or rearrange my break to accommodate my child.

My advice to young moms who are just starting out: it’s important to realize that it may pay to earn a little less and work closer to home rather than schlep to a workplace in the city and put your energies into building an impressive career. This is especially true when one’s children are young and really need a hands-on parent when they are home. At this point in my life, building an outstanding resume is not as important to me as working for an understanding boss who accommodates working parents. The trade-off is absolutely worth it.

Anne Neuberger

AS TOLD TO BARBARA BENSOUSSAN

ANNNE NEUBERGER has a sweet voice and slender frame that can easily mislead one into thinking she is younger than her thirty-six years. But there’s nothing lightweight about Anne or the job she does for the Department of Defense.

I grew up in Boro Park and attended Bais Yaakov of Boro Park and then Touro College, where I studied finance and computer science. After that, I worked in my family’s business, a financial services company. When I was already married with one child and expecting my second, I enrolled in an MBA program at Columbia University. There was an option to do a third year to earn a second master’s degree. Since the core courses were the same in both programs, my husband urged me to “treat myself” to the third year. Hence I earned a second master’s in international relations, with a concentration in the Persian Gulf.

Toward the end of the program, one of my professors suggested that I apply to the White House Fellows program, which selects individuals between the ages of thirty and forty (I was thirty-one at the time) to spend a year working for senior White House staff members, cabinet secretaries and other top-ranking government officials. [It is one of the country’s most prestigious programs for leadership and public service. White House Fellowships offer exceptional young men and women first-hand experience working at the highest levels of the federal government.]

Barbara Bensoussan has worked as a university instructor and a social worker, and currently writes for Jewish newspapers and magazines. Her most recent novel is A New Song (Southfield, Michigan, 2007).
At the time, I had a two-year-old and a one-year-old, and I didn’t think it would be appropriate for me. Two years later, however, I decided to apply for the program. Since I had a business degree and business experience, I thought that if I were accepted, I would be assigned to the Treasury Department. To my surprise, I was assigned to the Department of Defense in the Pentagon. They had never selected a woman before, and I was told that I was chosen because I had “operational experience,” that is, I had run my family’s business. I put in a year, and it was wonderful. After that, I was appointed special assistant to the secretary of the Navy, working on “troubled programs”—programs that were running over budget or not functioning well.

Shortly afterward, a new military command was established—Cyber Command—consisting of a team recruited to work on protecting military networks. I became part of that team, and it evolved into my current position as special assistant to the director of the National Security Agency, which is one of the largest intelligence agencies of the Department of Defense. I’m part of a group that is responsible for raising the security of critical private sector cyber-infrastructure.

Because I get so much sipuk (satisfaction) from my job, I never feel that it depletes me, although obviously there are times when I am tired. My children are eleven and ten now, so they’re more independent. I need to arrive at my desk early in the morning, so my husband gets the kids out to school before leaving for his job (he’s a lawyer). Our kids are pretty organized and generally get themselves ready in half an hour. They’ve never known anything other than having a working mother.

I work long hours, and therefore have to make decisions about how to best allocate my time. I used to stress out about neatness, but I don’t anymore, and I pay for help. I don’t shop much—I’ve cut out going to malls; I order online instead. I have a babysitter for the kids after school, and she also helps with food preparation.

I shop for Shabbos on Wednesday and split the cooking with my husband. After fourteen years of marriage, we’ve established a rhythm. I don’t bake challah or cake, because it’s just not that important to me. I’ve learned to decide for myself what’s right for me and my family instead of listening to what other people think I should do. For me, a happy family is the most important thing.

I tend to invite more guests for yamim tovim than for Shabbos. In fact, we never have guests on Friday night; that’s our family meal. On Friday night my husband and I go for a walk—often just near the house—and that’s an opportunity to spend time together since we don’t have a “date night.” But we’re still working on finding more time for each other. The kids and our jobs always seem to take priority—I think that’s the hardest piece of the juggling act.

During the week, I don’t have a lot of time to daven. But I love our shul in Baltimore (we moved to Baltimore seven years ago for my job) and attend every Shabbos. I go to shul because I enjoy it, not because I feel it’s a duty.
I devote Shabbos and Sunday to spending time with the kids. While our son is in yeshivah in the morning, I’ll go for a walk with my daughter, or paint pottery, or engage in some other activity with her. In the afternoon, we generally have a family activity. I have a Blackberry, but I try not to answer it when the kids are around; I’m not reachable 24/6.

I’ve found that what I’ve given up most in the work-family equation is personal time with friends. On the other hand, I’m able to enjoy interactions with other women and the satisfaction of doing chesed through Sister to Sister, an organization I founded with a few others to help divorced Jewish women. Sister to Sister began seven years ago when I got a call from a friend about a divorced woman who had lost her programming job and was about to be evicted along with her four kids. We raised some money to help her (at the time I didn’t know she had also been the victim of abuse). I was living in Boro Park then, and couldn’t believe that this could happen to a Jewish woman. I began making calls to see if there were any chesed organizations to help women in situations like this, but there weren’t. I began talking to divorced women and heard from many who were suffering from loneliness and financial stress; many had to give up financial support from their husbands in order to receive a get, and they lacked education or training to obtain decent jobs.

Sister to Sister offers many services, including yom tov placements, mentoring and Shabbatons. We currently have some 200 volunteers and 800 members, mostly in New York and New Jersey. I derive great personal joy and spiritual recharging from it—it’s become my own social network. It’s the kind of thing where you get back so much more than you give.

Simply entering into the wider working world was a big change for me. I grew up in a pretty sheltered milieu. My family is what you would call “very heimish.” My mother and sister are stay-at-home mothers, and growing up, I didn’t really have any role models of working women. I heard a lot of “a frum woman can’t do this; a frum woman doesn’t do that.” But I strongly feel that a woman should use the talents Hashem gave her, and that being frum is not a barrier to professional success.

There was a good deal of culture shock when I first came to work in Washington, DC. While my colleagues had heard about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when it came to Sukkos, they said, “What? Another holiday, so soon?” I never had to explain my own practices or view my religion through the eyes of other people before, and it took time for me to get comfortable answering people’s questions about Judaism.

When I first started the Fellows program, I had the opportunity to go on an eight-day trip to various countries in the Middle East. There was no kosher food, so I ate vegetables and drank coffee with the others, and then ate from my stock of cereals and granola bars in my room. One day, a three-star general from Washington State, a man you might characterize as real salt of the earth, took me aside and said, “Anne, I need to talk to you . . . you know, everybody is talking about you.” I was sure I had done something terribly wrong. I felt ready to dissolve into tears, anticipating the worst. He started telling me that medical care is available and that they could help—it seemed that everyone was convinced I was anorexic. So I had to explain to him that I only eat kosher food, and he responded by offering to arrange it for me. I didn’t feel comfortable asking for special treatment, so I just kept refusing.

Well, back then I didn’t know you don’t argue with a three-star general. As soon as I boarded the plane for the next trip, the steward pulled me aside and proceeded to show me a cabinet stocked with all this kosher food I never eat—borscht, gefilte fish, the
works. He said, “The general told me, ‘Whatever this kosher thing is—make sure you get it for her!’”

I learned through experience that if you are firmly committed to your principles, people will respect you. My non-Jewish and non-observant colleagues are some of the finest people I’ve ever met. They’re disciplined, committed, principled. Obviously, there are boundaries; I can’t go out with them on their Friday night get-togethers or to Saturday Marine Corps parades. I used to feel left out, but I realized that I really do need and value my Shabbosim.

I wish I had been more prepared for going out to work as a frum woman in the secular world; I certainly didn’t get such preparation in Bais Yaakov. There are all kinds of challenges. The first time I had to walk out on my team on a Friday afternoon was very hard—in fact, I still find it hard, even when I offer to come back on Motzaei Shabbos or Sunday. It would have really helped to have a frum female mentor show me the ropes and help me feel secure about standing up for who I am.

I’m the first frum person most of my colleagues have ever encountered, and it’s a tremendous responsibility to always be an example of integrity. I do my best, even if I don’t get it right 100 percent of the time.

My husband helps keep me on the straight and narrow. He’ll call and say, “Anne, it’s time to come home . . .” I give him all the credit—I couldn’t do what I do without all the help and support he gives me.

In terms of community support for working mothers, I wouldn’t mind a little more accommodation with regard to yeshivah schedules. Why do they schedule school plays for 11:00 in the morning, or 1:00 in the afternoon? For a working parent, it’s so much better not to break up the day. I was once unable to attend my daughter’s school play. Afterward, she told me, “Mommy, you were the only parent who didn’t come.” That felt awful. Teachers should also be available at convenient times for working mothers; it would go a long way to help us.

We should change our message to young women and tell them that they can do whatever they aspire to, even if they have to take ten years off to raise a family. Every woman needs an outlet for her talents, whatever that outlet may be. Find something you enjoy, and keep your skills fresh. If at all possible, find yourself a mentor, preferably a frum Jewish woman. Even if you don’t work outside the home, you can still find an outlet for your talents. You like to sing? Join the N’shei Players. Like to work with kids? Start an activities group. Also, learn to navigate the secular world as a frum Jew without apologizing, without abandoning your principles, but also with a sense of how and when to be flexible. I’m happy to offer myself as a mentor to younger women.

When I think about how seven out of eight of my great-grandparents were killed by the Nazis and here I am in a job where I can contribute my skills and make a difference working for the US government, I feel such a debt of gratitude. I really believe in our country and the ideals it seeks to uphold.

To hear an interview with Anne Neuberger, visit http://bit.ly/QPA1od.
Tips for the WORKING MOM

By Tzivia Reiter

Accept Your Decision to Work and Come to Terms with It. Don’t let other people’s remarks create unnecessary guilt. Understand that those who are condescending toward other people’s choices are likely insecure about their own.

Acknowledge Your Contributions. Write down the specific ways in which working benefits your family, i.e., paying toward your mortgage, qualifying your family for medical insurance, contributing toward yeshivah tuition, giving you an outlet so that you can be a more fulfilled and patient mother, etc. When you are having a difficult day, review the list.

Identify Your Weak Spots. Determine what your most challenging weekly tasks are, the ones that really drain you of your physical and emotional energy, and either outsource or delegate them to someone else. (And then let go!)

Put Your Oxygen Mask on First. Make time to rejuvenate and refresh yourself. You can’t take proper care of your family if you don’t take proper care of yourself first.

Be Selective. Don’t commit to anything if it takes you beyond your limits, even if it is something that feels wrong to say no to, like hosting extra Shabbos guests or volunteering for a chesed event. Remember that yatz secharo b’hefseido (Pirkei Avos 5:14). What you accomplish may be offset by the toll it takes on you and your family.

Create Boundaries. Decide that when you are at work, you are fully focused being there, but when you are at home, attend to your family only. Learning to be in the moment—whether at work or at home—is key to making the most of your time and strengthening your relationships. Come home and set aside the to-do list, and just spend the first twenty minutes reconnecting with your family.

Beware of Technology Traps. Put away your iPhone, which gives your family the sense that they do not have your full attention. Save e-mails, phone calls and after-hours’ work for when your children are in bed.

Be on the Lookout for Opportunities to Bond with Your Kids. Tack special one-on-one time onto routine errands, like grocery shopping or a doctor’s visit, by taking your child out for ice cream afterward or going to the park.

Take Advantage of Your Kids’ Days Off, as well as Your Own. Even if you can’t take off the whole two weeks your kids might be off from school or camp, try to take off a day or two. This sends an important message that your children are your priority and you don’t want to miss out on spending extra time together.

Share Your Work with Your Children. Work should not be a distant, mysterious place that swallows up your mother for so many hours each day. Discuss with your children, in age-appropriate language, why you go to work and what you do there. If feasible, take them to your workplace and introduce them to your colleagues so they have a visual image of where you are during the day.

Take an Accounting. Periodically take inventory of your lifestyle and how you and your family are doing. Are you generally feeling satisfied, or do you persistently feel harried and stressed out? Are you giving the best parts of yourself only to your work, and not to your family? If so, what adjustments can you make to your routine that might yield a better outcome?

Keep Things in Perspective. If you are consistently present for your children, and make it clear through your words and actions that they are your priority, they will be able to cope through a difficult day or week in the life of their working mother. It is unlikely that they will dwell as much as you do over any one rough patch.

Experience Joy. Feel happy and fulfilled at work and, even more importantly, at home. Children who feel their parents’ joy over being with them—whether they are working or stay-at-home mothers—fare best at the end of the day. Take the time to enjoy your children. Think about which activities you both find fun and meaningful and incorporate them into your time together. This goes a long way toward strengthening the parent-child bond even within limited time frames.

Tzivia Reiter is the author of the recently released book Briefcases and Baby Bottles (New York, 2012). She is a licensed clinical social worker and a director at Ohel Bais Ezra, where she has dedicated her career to helping individuals with disabilities and their families. Her many articles on topics impacting the Jewish community, including dating and marriage, mental health and disabilities, have appeared in major Jewish publications.
I was in my mid-thirties when I got married. At the time, I was very invested in my work and advancing nicely in my field. Now that I have children, however, I find that my major fulfillment comes from them—not my career. I waited a long time to have a family, and now that I do, I want to do my best by them.

My job imposes a very rigid schedule. I’m allotted eleven sick days and six personal days, and any other time off is regarded as unpaid leave. That makes it very stressful when my kids have a day off—a holiday or a fast day—and I don’t. My parents live nearby, and they help out. My husband can sometimes stay home; he has his own business and has a more flexible schedule.

My job imposes a very rigid schedule. I’m allotted eleven sick days and six personal days, and any other time off is regarded as unpaid leave. That makes it very stressful when my kids have a day off—a holiday or a fast day—and I don’t. My parents live nearby, and they help out. My husband can sometimes stay home; he has his own business and has a more flexible schedule.

Depending how the Jewish calendar and the holidays fall, some years I have to take off days without pay, and that’s hard on our budget. The complete lack of flexibility is also very difficult. If I have to take a child to the doctor, for example, I’ll sometimes skip lunch and leave an hour early. If a child is really sick, then it becomes a “Mommy day” and that means I have to take off from work.

I prepare for Shabbos and yom tov by keeping things simple and making lists. I also keep my menus really basic, nothing fancy. I make the same chicken and the same desserts every Shabbos.

Unfortunately, spending quality time with my husband is a challenge. We send each other text messages and e-mails during the day, updating each other on household errands. In-depth, real conversations take place when we take the time to sit on the couch for a few minutes in the evening and talk. On Shabbos we have longer stretches of quality time together.

Most nights I would rather be home with the kids than go out to a shiur. As a single, I used to learn a lot—with a chavrusa or by attending shiurim. Now I feel that I am better off investing my time in my family.

I would advise other women in my position to keep Shabbos and yom tov simple, and to learn to say no to time-consuming extras you can’t realistically fit in. I would like to see some help from the schools in terms of scheduling. Teachers, please don’t tell me on Thursday afternoon that my daughter is Shabbos Ima the next day! I’ve had these panicky moments of, “What do you mean you need a butterfly outfit for tomorrow?” Even though I work full time, I’m a very involved parent. It would help if the teachers would keep us informed.

In the Orthodox world, the men’s schedules place much of the family burden on the women. My husband is out a lot—for work or davening or learning, sometimes when I really could use his help. Fortunately we live in a community with many different minyanim, so if he has to miss one minyan, he can catch another.

I sometimes hear stay-at-home mothers talking about being overwhelmed and complaining about the cooking and cleaning, et cetera. I can’t help but think, Yeah, well, I did all that too—and I also went to work! I really wish I could work less hours, but financially that is not realistic for us. We also pay full tuition, and sometimes I wonder if I’m killing myself trying to pay the bills while other people are getting breaks because they’re not working. It’s hard enough to pay our own tuition, so I don’t really want to subsidize someone else who’s not sweating as hard as I am to meet the payments. On the other hand, I tell myself that my situation is far better than friends of mine who work until six every night, or have an hour commute to work each way.

Most of the mothers I know are not working because they want to, but because they have to. It makes for a very stressful life, but we do our best to make it work and give our kids the attention they need and deserve.