Like many of you, my day begins with early morning multitasking: making a cup of coffee, packing lunch, checking my e-mail, and doing some dishes from the night before. Most of us live our lives, rushing and juggling different obligations, work and family. We often feel stressed and exhausted by what is expected from us and what we expect of ourselves. Most of the time we are trying to do so many things at once that nothing gets our full attention. You are at a meeting with colleagues, while texting your spouse. You are having a cup of coffee with a friend whom you haven’t seen in a long time, while checking your work e-mail. You are driving your kids to school while trying to participate in a conference call. Even exercise and leisure activities – meant to help you relax -- become tasks that must be scheduled into your busy day.

Not long ago I heard a story on NPR about a Los Angeles restaurant that is offering a deal to customers who agree to look at their fellow diners instead of their phone screens.

Eva Restaurant gives a 5 percent discount to customers who leave their cell phones with staff when they are seated. The owner Mark Gold said that the policy is not about other diners who might be annoyed by cell phone chatter or the glow of Smartphone screens, but rather an attempt to create an environment where diners connect to each other instead of to technology. Gold said that nearly half the customers take advantage of the discount, and many express gratitude for the opportunity to let go of their devices for a while.
I have a love/hate relationship with technology, especially my Phone, and the multitasking it makes possible. I can be anywhere, responding to e-mails, reading an article, being in touch with my family, uploading pictures of my daughter, checking pictures of my family in Israel or Peru, checking my work calendar, doing my banking, shopping and being in touch with the office all at the same time. Technology and fast communication can greatly enhance our professional and personal lives. But when I noticed how often I check my phone while having dinner with my family, or while having a cup of coffee with a friend, I realized that multitasking also prevents me from being present in the way I should be, living in the moment, being with the people I am actually with. Some of you know, that during my vacation this last summer I decided not to check my work e-mail. I noticed how different it is to have a meal with people I love without checking my e-mail and without thinking about the next thing I need to do. But mostly I noticed that the expectation to get everything done, perfectly and at the right time, comes largely from within me and from my own desire to do it all and have it all.

I believe that many of you share this experience; we juggle work life and family life, obligations and leisure. There are just not enough hours in the day to do everything we need (or think we need) to do.

Add to that the sense many of us have of obligation to the larger community we live in. How many of us say – there are so many public causes I wish I could be involved in. Even leisure becomes something we need to schedule and check off the list.

Can we have it all? Can we do it all? Today I want to invite us all to stop and ask the question. What do our lives look like?
Can we have it all? This is a question that many of us have asked at one time or another in our lives. This question was brought into the public consciousness again this summer when Anne-Marie Slaughter, the former director of policy planning for the U.S. State Department, wrote an article for the Atlantic Magazine called: Why Women Still Can’t Have it All (Atlantic Magazine, July/August 2012).

In her article, Slaughter wrote that she left her position in Washington so she could spend more time with her teenage children, whom she felt needed her, more than anybody else did. Slaughter wrote: “I still strongly believe that women can “have it all” (and that men can too). I believe that we can “have it all at the same time.” But not today, not with the way America’s economy and society are currently structured”. She then listed changes that need to happen in the system in order to allow women to gain power and be able to juggle their work and family obligations.

In response to this article many other articles and blog posts were written. Deena Fuchs who is the Director of Communications at AVI CHAI -- an organization committed to the perpetuation of the Jewish people, Judaism, and the centrality of the State of Israel to the Jewish people -- wrote about how the executive director of the foundation understood the needs she and others in her office had and created a system that would allow people to alternate between working from home and working in the office. She described the way they took advantage of advanced technology and created a new system of accountability (Making Motherhood Work- With Work, ejewishphilantropy.com – July 2012)
From the other side, Rebecca Traister who writes for salon.com is critical of the question itself—“my proposal is this: – she writes-- We should immediately strike the phrase “have it all” from the feminist lexicon and never, ever use it again.” (Can Modern Women “Have it all” salon.com - June 2012).

I wonder - What does it even mean to have it all? What is this ALL that we want? And what is the cost of trying to have it? In the race to have it all, do we become too focused on our own needs, expectations, and achievements that we forget to connect deeply and authentically with others?

Certainly I believe that we can achieve many different things in our lives, that there are ways to have both successful careers and fulfilling personal lives. I also believe that this is definitely not exclusively a women’s issue.

We can do a lot. The question is: what goes into making our choices? Which values determine the choices we make, and what are the repercussions of those choices? How do we decide how to spend the time we have?

Our Torah-reading today, begins with Isaac’s birth, and his naming. After weaning Isaac, Sarah becomes worried. Sarah sees Ishmael, the son of Hagar- the maidservant, the woman that she earlier gave as a surrogate to her husband so that he could bring a child into the world, “laughing” and playing with Itzchak. Sarah’s immediate response is to ask Avraham to drive out Hagar and her son: “Garesh et ha-Ama hazot v’et b’na” (Genesis 21:10).

For many of us this story is very challenging. Sarah is presented in this part of the story, as a woman controlled by her jealousy and fear. But as we spend more time with the story we may also identify a mother who is protecting her child, or perhaps even a person who is trying to figure out how
to fulfill her many obligations. How often do we think of Sarah as the woman responsible for fulfilling the promise God made to Avraham, that he would have as many offspring as the stars? How might that responsibility have made Sarah feel?

The stories of the Torah, especially of the book of Genesis, can be very powerful when we recognize our own story in them. They tell the story of the Jewish people, but at the same time these are also the stories of human beings, of their failures and their struggles. I want to offer a reading of Sarah that resonates with my own life and reflects on the questions I shared earlier. I am grateful to my hevrutah, study partner, Rabbi Emma Kippley-Ogman from KI, for exploring these questions with me in relation to our torah reading.

This year, I want us to ask: what kind of pressure was Sarah under? Can we imagine her so occupied with the expectations of God and Abraham, perhaps already indistinguishable from her expectations of herself that she could not take a moment to stop, breath and think what the cost of her actions would be? In her quest to fulfill God’s promise, did Sarah stop seeing Hagar as a human being and instead see her only as a tool for and later an obstacle to her own success?

Rabbinic literature speaks of Sarah as an openhearted and generous woman whose tent was open for all those who came in. But, what was really going on in her mind and in her life?

At the risk of being accused of projection, I am going to guess that she was probably feeling frustrated and insecure. She is supposed to be something she is not. Will she able to bring about the realization of God’s promise, she
wonders? We know almost nothing regarding Sara’s feelings about her barrenness. The Torah does describe her frustration and anger, once she learns that Hagar is pregnant but we are left guessing how much of this is because she could not become pregnant and how much is because Hagar could.

Writer and activist, Audre Lorde once asked - “What woman here is so enamored of her own oppression that she cannot see her heel print upon another woman’s face?” (The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism, quoted by Ruth Behar). Rabbi Emma Kippley- Ogman explains: “Sarah was so wrapped up in her drive to perfect her own life that she could not see her impact on the other woman who shared her world. And Hagar, with less material impact but with profound emotional effect, could not anticipate how her small success would so injure Sarah” (Dvar Torah – Rosh Hashanah 5773). As Ruth Behar, a poet, essayist and anthropologist, reads our story: “Neither Sarah nor Hagar was capable of seeing the heelprint each left on the other’s face.” (Sarah and Hagar: The Heelprints upon their faces- from Beginning Anew, edited by Reimer and Kates, page 35).

Sarah is, of course, not the only biblical figure struggling with fertility. Our Haftarah reading today tells us about another woman, Hannah, who is also struggling with her inability to have children (I Samuel 1-2:10). Rachel, Jacob’s wife shares the same sadness and frustration. We get some sense of her inner turmoil when she says to Jacob: “Haveh li banim, ve im ein meta anochi” - “Give me children, or I am dead” (Genesis 30:1).

But we do not hear such a demand from Sarah. We know what she is expected to do, and we also know that she reaches out for the reproductive technology of her time – a surrogate. But things don’t go as planned, and after
the birth Hagar does not terminate parental rights. Ishmael, who was meant to fulfill the promise, belongs to Hagar not to Sarah.

As I read this story from this perspective, I feel compassion for Sarah, even in the parts of the story where I usually feel disappointed and angry about her choices and actions.

Yes, it is terrible that Sarah asks Abraham to cast out Hagar. But she is also the woman who is expected to be what she cannot be, and who uses any means to fulfill her obligations. Might we see Sarah as a product of the struggle with expectations and obligations that she is afraid not to fulfill? In this story, Hagar and Ishmael are the ones who will pay the price for Sarah trying to have it all, and it seems that Sarah is not able to see that. In this story, one woman trying to have it all, means another having nothing. The world of perfection does not have room for both Sara and Hagar. But who lives in the world of perfection? As I think more about this story I find myself more and more siding with Traister. The drive to have it all not only is not useful, it can also be destructive. It can get in the way of authentic and compassionate relationships.

When living our lives trying to fulfill so many expectations and roles, we can easily become angry and respond in ways that are hurtful and wrong. When we focus on what we want to achieve or attain, we may stop seeing the people around us as human beings with whom we are in relationship, and instead see them only as tools or obstacles on our path to getting things done. Often it is others who pay the price for decisions we make, be it our parents, our children, our spouses, our friends, our colleagues, those who work with us and those who work for us.
This is true for men and women alike, for single and married people, for those with children and without children, for all of us here. No matter how old we are and in what stage of life we find ourselves, the bar for success is extremely high. We often feel the need to be perfect and fast. We try to be perfect professionals, perfect children to our parents, parents to our children, friends, siblings, spouses, citizens of this country and the world. We are also supposed to take care of ourselves. We are trying to have it all. We are trying to do it all. And in doing so, we may become so task-oriented or achievement-oriented that we lose sight of the relationships that make our success possible and our lives meaningful.

One of the central prayers of our High Holidays is Unetane Tokef. The liturgy reminds us of the fragility of life and how little control we have over it.

The end of the prayer captures its essence: “Mashul kecheres Hanishbar, kechatzir yavesh, uchetzitz novel, ketzel over, ucheanan kala, ucheruach noshavet, ucheavak, porach, vechachalom yauf”. “Our lives are like a fragile vessel, like the grass that withers, the flower that fades, the shadow that passes, the cloud that vanishes, the wind that blows, the dust that floats and “k’chalom ya’uf” – like a dream that vanishes.

No matter how much we do, or how much we achieve, our lives remain fragile and finite.

Today, on Rosh Hashanah we are here to stop for a moment, to remind ourselves of the fragility of our lives, to ask ourselves, what do our lives look like? Can we have it all? Should we try? In the craziness of our lives, do we remember to breath? And to hug? To eat, to pray? To celebrate Shabbat? To
connect with the people in our lives? Do we see who is next to us? Or just the next task before us? Trying to juggle our different responsibilities, do we remember that we cannot ultimately do it all? And that we cannot live perfect lives? What are the values that are informing the decisions of our lives? And how are we spending our time and resources? Who are we spending time with? Are we making a difference? And who is paying the price for our decisions?

I invite you to take a moment to share with the person sitting next to you one thing you would like to do differently in the coming year. Something or someone you would like to pay more attention to? A new practice of mindfulness? Eating dinner without checking your e-mail, like in that restaurant in Los Angeles? Making time for prayer? Acknowledging the people in your life who make your success possible? Whatever small or big change that can help you to live your life a bit differently.

*Time for conversations*

May this gathering here on Rosh Hashanah be a moment of grace, a moment of possibility and hope, a moment that redemption feels so close. May we not let that moment of grace fade away by being so preoccupied and occupied with everything we need to do. May we remember to look into people’s eyes and into our own lives and find redemption there.

*Shana Tova.*