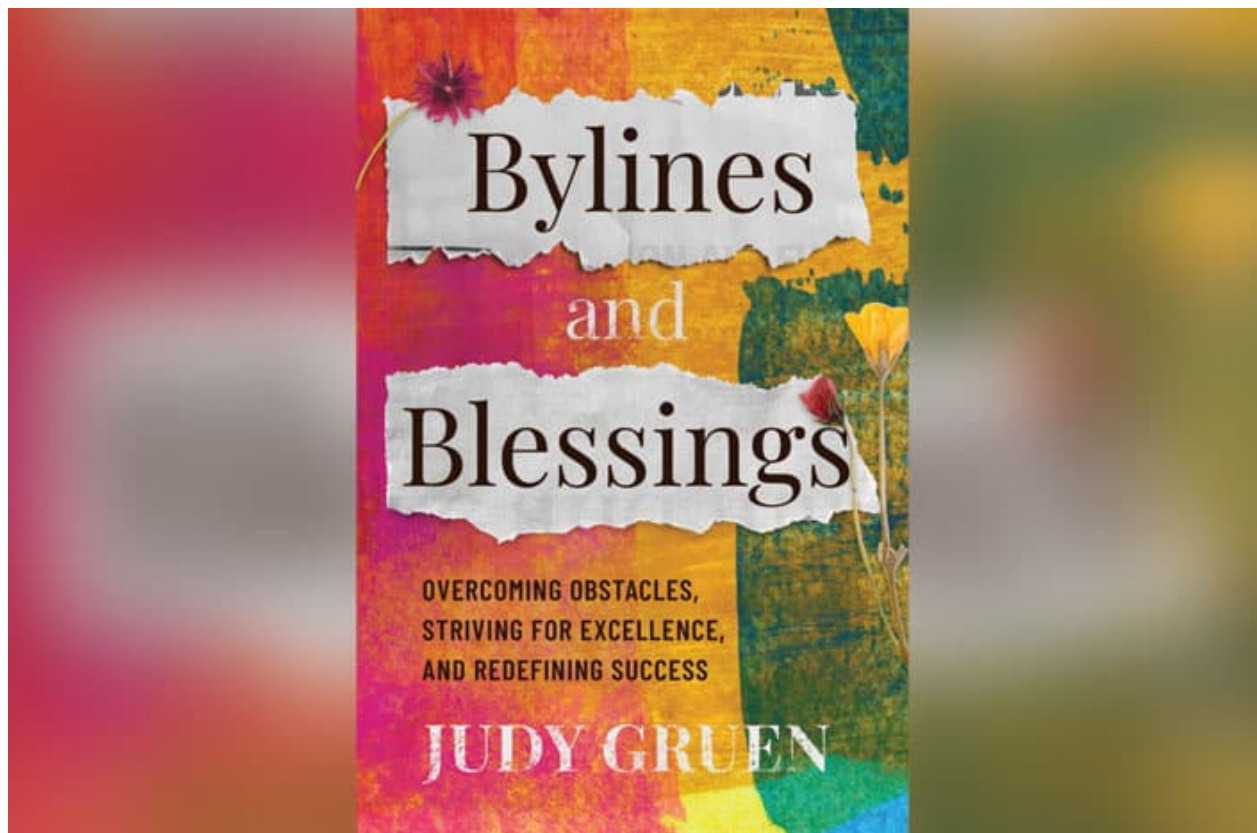


What Happens When Career Ambition Clashes with Cherished Religious Values?

"Bylines and Blessings" touts the critical importance of failing, and the irreplaceable triumph of growth and learning, whether professionally, emotionally, or spiritually.

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Several years ago, author Judy Gruen shared this candid admission with a Jewish spiritual adviser who was visiting Los Angeles. “I’ve been working

so hard to become a successful writer, but I'm not successful enough! I want to be successful in the material sense of the word and can't seem to tame the beast of my ambition, which is suffocating my deeper wisdom." By then, Gruen was an award-winning author of multiple books and had been published in The Wall Street Journal, Chicago Tribune, Boston Globe and New York Daily News, as well as many Jewish newspapers and websites, including the Jewish Journal and Aish.com. She had embraced Orthodox Judaism in her 20s and in the decades that passed enjoyed the blessings of raising a family with her husband, Jeff, while also working tirelessly as a writer, editor, author and speaker. Gruen had built a deeply meaningful and nourishing family and spiritual life, but the thirst of her career ambition remained unslaked.

Gruen's admission to the spiritual advisor that her unquenched ambition was "suffocating" the deeper wisdom of her soul is undoubtedly resonant, but what is particularly powerful is that she has shared this exchange and other moments of compassionate vulnerability with readers in her new memoir, *Bylines and Blessings: Overcoming Obstacles, Striving for Excellence, and Redefining Success* (Köehler Books).

Among humorists and essayists, Gruen is known for her sharp wit, intelligent argumentation and a deep resolve to imbue her work with Jewish pride. That pride is rooted in her identity as an Orthodox Jewish woman who in her previous memoir, 2017's *The Skeptic and the Rabbi*, fought back against what she describes in the book as the "Jewish misery memoir market," through sharing her unwavering love of the Torah and its

teachings. In Gruen's hands, words are nearly sacred: funny, indulgent, or powerful, but never irresponsibly offensive or hurtful.

Still, Gruen is the first to admit that asking a writer to hold back on certain words is like asking a rabbi to compose a short sermon. But years of Jewish learning and wisdom have taught Gruen that words hold the power to create new realities, as well as to destroy entire worlds. That also explains why she is no fan of some parents' habits of posting about their children's visibly embarrassing moments online.

"I wanted my work to be part of the solution and not the problem," Gruen writes. In addition to her previous memoir she has also published three humor books: *The Women's Daily Irony Supplement* (2007), *Carpool Tunnel Syndrome: Motherhood as Shuttle Diplomacy* (2000) and one of my favorite humor books on the topic of women and dieting, *Till We Eat Again* (2012), in which Gruen writes, "I had my fat tested today. It came back positive."

Before she began to learn about Orthodox Judaism, Gruen was a self-admitted secular, liberal Jewish feminist who, in 1980, transferred from UCLA to UC Berkeley, where she found meaning writing for Ha'Etgar, the Jewish student paper. She identified strongly as a Jew and was proud enough to wear a Jewish star necklace. When Gruen traveled to San Francisco to cover a feminist conference and discovered hostility toward traditional Judaism, she titled her story, "What's a Smart Feminist Like You Doing Wearing a Jewish Star?"

Gruen received her master's in journalism from Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism, where her professors constituted "the tough journalists of the old school." They engaged students in vibrant debates on topics such as "the public's right to know" and actively encouraged Gruen and her peers to debate their side of an argument face-to-face, with factual evidence and respect.

After graduate school, Gruen moved back to L.A. and began her career as a writer. Ironically, she was a copy editor of the newly launched Jewish Journal for several months in 1986 before getting her first full-time gig, writing in the healthcare field. When her request to edit stories for the first time was granted, her boss, Carol, asked Gruen to come to her office and, to her chagrin, told her, "Judy, you're a good writer, but you'll never be a good editor."

Gruen's memoir is ripe with stories of seeming failure, of closed doors and rejection notices, wardrobe malfunctions at precisely the worst time and of public speaking fiascos. When she began writing books, she also experienced the downfalls of publishing, and during a temporary job as an editor for a Hollywood industry publication, she entered her office and found her replacement standing at her desk (her boss had forgotten to mention she had been replaced). While confronting her rude and entitled replacement, Gruen's sensible, modest skirt began to nearly fall apart. In perfect prose, Gruen writes, "My skirt was unraveling and so was I."

The memoir also reminds us of the now-forgotten rewards of hard work and sheer grit: When she set her mind to write her first book, *Carpool Tunnel*

Syndrome, Gruen spent months researching the publishing world and, as opposed to some writers today, had modest expectations, certain she would not be able to secure an agent. One can only wonder how many first-time aspiring authors today easily expect to find an agent and publish a bestseller. Rather than a condemnation of today's writers, this is a sad symptom of today's rapid-rise, influencer-inspired chase of instant fame and endless followers.

Even a special bulk sale of the book had its challenges, and Gruen spent long hours at the post office shipping the book to 100 locations, all in small quantities ("... four to a school in Podunk, Kansas; 12 to Smackover, Arkansas; 18 to Sandwich, Illinois."). Looking back with hard-won humility, Gruen recounts the pain and embarrassment of not selling a single book at a book fair, or the extraordinarily bad timing of scheduling her first speaking event for her first book on ... Sept. 11, 2001.

Bylines and Blessings touts the critical importance of failing, and the irreplaceable triumph of growth and learning, whether professionally, emotionally, or spiritually. At a time when most successful memoirs are written by celebrities and/or play up their terminal family dysfunctions, Gruen isn't afraid to share the moments when she fell flat on her face, and both her fears and worried instincts were proven true. Anyone who is contemplating a career in writing will understand from *Bylines and Blessings* why being a professional writer is unpredictable and difficult, yet blissfully rewarding, and a testament to the words of one of Gruen's mentors, who said, "Creativity is energy."

Gruen was thrilled to get a job writing for the Centers for the Health Sciences at UCLA when she was only 23, toting her “notebook, pen, tape recorder, and raw inexperience.” After marrying her husband in the late 1980s, she edited several publications for a Fortune 500 healthcare company, working for a well-meaning but difficult boss who forbade her from including the words “said,” “is” and “are” in all her stories.

Writing part-time when her children were young, Gruen experienced “jealousy pangs” when she saw photos of young female editors in women’s magazines. Her candor is especially important at a time when so many women, especially working mothers, are still inundated by messages that they can (or that they should at least try) to have it all.

She admits that during her tough time trying to “slay the dragon” of her professional ambitions, one day she became so engrossed in writing a story that she forgot to pick up her kids from school. “That afternoon when I forgot about my kids, I was jolted into realizing how much of my sense of self and even my sense of worth was bonded to my writing,” she writes, almost as if she can see into the mind of every woman who struggles to find her place in her career and in her home.

Much of Gruen’s memoir naturally forces readers to ponder whether, as the adage goes, things were actually better a few decades ago. In the 1980s and 1990s, when Gruen was fine-tuning her writing and editing chops, everything, from respectful debate and journalistic integrity to accessing work satisfaction seemed less ethereal.

In fact, reading the book reminded me of a certain indescribable comfort I have also derived from watching films about newspaper offices, or, for that matter, any office environment, that were produced in the 1980s. Though Gruen does not often mention specific dates (though this would have been a welcome addition to the memoir), her vivid descriptions not only nurture nostalgia, but also enable readers to easily imagine the deliciously tangible scenarios she describes, from the rich hues of her boss's designer skirts to how she patiently waited for the typesetter to reset lines of type for the Berkeley Jewish student paper.

Bylines and Blessings reminds us of a time when the office was king and the social elements of interacting face-to-face with co-workers and bosses was almost as vital to a sense of professional meaning as the work itself.

Over time, Gruen began to infuse her writing with more traditional values, including using her words to fight for a “kinder, gentler” world for children, one that would expose them to less inappropriate content. In Gruen's words, she, her husband, and thousands of formerly secular Jews who have embraced Orthodox Judaism had “made the countercultural decision to reclaim our spiritual heritage.”

She has also confronted the mainstream media's left-wing bias while acknowledging the reality on the ground; as a journalist, she understands that “the media create and shape messages through the stories they choose to cover and which they choose to ignore.”

In the past few decades, Gruen has continued to write prolifically for Jewish media, motivated to show a healthier and happier side of Orthodox Judaism than what has been presented by secular media outlets and in other memoirs. Whether embracing an Orthodox Jewish community in Venice during the early years of her marriage or in the Pico-Robertson neighborhood of West Los Angeles, Gruen's love and learning of Judaism has helped form and build her career as well as her life. This is stark contrast to when she had first met her husband and thought, "It was a shame that he was flirting with Orthodoxy. I hoped he'd get over it soon."

Reflecting on those tough, early discussions with Jeff about embracing Orthodox Judaism and his more conservative political views, Gruen writes, "Sometimes I found them polarizing. Sometimes I found them paralyzing. But in the process of these conversations, increasingly uncomfortable for me, I learned something hugely significant and humbling: I was planning my career with meticulous care, envisioning where I wanted it to lead, step by step. But I was only planning a career. Jeff was planning a life."

Her choices reveal the inevitable rewards of growth through discomfort, and of wrestling with one's own beliefs and attitudes to retain a more open, expanded mind.

Gruen began to feel "cheated" by her limited Jewish knowledge and discovered Jewish teachings she had never even known. Until then, she conceded to having felt "Jewish enough"; such admissions render the memoir relevant and an important read in a new, post-Oct. 7 reality in

which Jews worldwide are showing signs of growing identification with their faith and ethnicity, sometimes for the first time.

The memoir was written before Oct. 7, but Gruen's prescience is remarkable, particularly her observation that, "Historically, secular or relatively uninvolved Jews eventually discover that their apathy toward their faith is no defense against the relentless forces of antisemitism. But if you have to pay the price for being Jewish, why not at least explore the benefits and features?"

As she shifted toward more traditional values, she also worried about "betraying" her liberal friends. "This shift scared me, threatening my sense of self as a thoughtful, sophisticated, compassionate liberal," she writes. As she shifted toward more traditional values, she also worried about "betraying" her liberal friends. "This shift scared me, threatening my sense of self as a thoughtful, sophisticated, compassionate liberal," she writes. Again, Gruen is referencing events that occurred several decades ago, but read today, they evoke an eerie prescience to a post-Oct. 7 awakening of left-of-center Jews who now are questioning friends, the media, and other institutions that they assumed would always welcome them with unconditional embrace.

In recent years Gruen struggled to broaden her professional network in the world of writing and journalism, when her religious and political views were increasingly at loggerheads with the broader writing community. She notes that writers who held "moderate or right-of-center views ... listened to and read from" more left-wing sources, but, in her experience, her colleagues

on the left seldom read more conservative sources (or much Jewish press, for that matter).

Describing an early crisis of professional faith, Gruen recounts life after 9/11 and asks Rabbi Moshe Cohen of Aish Ha'Torah Los Angeles (now known as the Community Shul) if she should abandon humor and focus on more serious topics related to Judaism. "Absolutely not," Cohen answered. "We need to laugh now more than ever. Your work is important."

In a refreshing reversal of the same stories we have repeatedly heard from former Orthodox Jewish authors, adhering to the "rules, rituals and restraints" of Judaism (in the words of one of her teachers, Rabbi Daniel Lapin) didn't stifle or limit Gruen's career; on the contrary, it improved and enriched her work, to say nothing of its influence on her own character and the way she and her husband raised their children. "The impact of what I was learning and living would add depth and substance to my work — because it's impossible to separate writing from life," she writes. "The lessons I was absorbing into my consciousness would also affect our children, cascading through them and their descendants."

In the last few years, Gruen has understood more than ever the limits of gaining a larger audience, especially as journalism and publishing have become even more politically polarized. The memoir highlights much of the politicization of writing and the media that Gruen has witnessed firsthand, and the costs of "coming out as a conservative."

From writing for an odd little trade magazine called Hospital Gift Shop Management to The Wall Street Journal (the former proved “surprisingly satisfying”) and for Jewish media and spiritual sites in particular, Gruen’s work has touched lives, and her readers include people of all faiths. She has pushed down doors when it was called for and drawn boundaries that closed other doors, when needed.

Gruen chases passion for the written word the way some today endlessly chase more followers online.

Gruen chases passion for the written word the way some today endlessly chase more followers online. Reading *Bylines and Blessings* made me feel like I was talking to an old, trusted friend. By the end of the memoir, she has made peace with not achieving the kind of commercial success she had wanted, because she understands that she has created a legacy through her career as a Jewish writer, and more important, a legacy of Jewish continuity through her children and grandchildren. That, she realizes, is success.

This is best encompassed in Gruen’s retelling of a speaking event in *The Skeptic and the Rabbi*, when one man raised his hand and asked Gruen if she was so fond of Orthodox Judaism, why didn’t she become a rabbi? After all, wasn’t it sexist?

Gruen loved the question and responded with depth, knowledge and compassion. “I’m most concerned with having an impact through my life’s work — not with having a title,” she said. “The titles I have as wife, mother,

daughter, sister, friend, community member, writer and especially Jew, are more than enough for me.”

Indeed, one of the biggest takeaways of Gruen’s memoir is the sage warning that investing in your career as the most vital galaxy in your universe reaps fleeting rewards. Often, our endless, often mundane contributions to ourselves, our families and our communities are sacred: holding children in our arms and softly reading to them from picture books; stopping and suddenly realizing we wish to write something that may help others laugh, learn or heal; or sometimes, in repeatedly burning the rice for dinner because we are still searching for that invisible balance between career and family.

In response to her admission to the Jewish spiritual advisor that she wasn’t “successful enough,” the woman asked Gruen a question that few agents, publishers or marketing gurus would have posed: “Tell me, Judy,” she asked, “where is the blessing coming from now in your work?”

Gruen immediately knew the answer: “The blessing is coming from my work in Jewish media,” she responded. And we, Jewish readers, have benefited deeply from Gruen’s unending blessings.

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