

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.

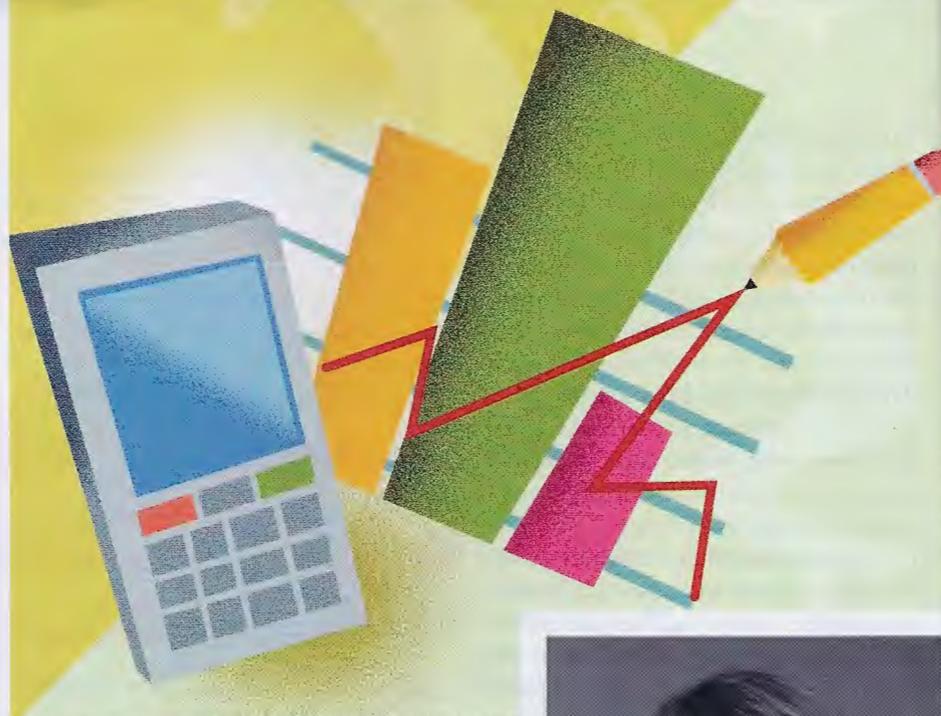
It was difficult for women in the job market during that time. Long after the male seniors who were C students had found jobs, I was still looking. I was finally hired as a junior accountant at PricewaterhouseCoopers LLC.

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

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Lydia E. Kess

AS TOLD TO
BARBARA BENSOUSSAN

NOW IN HER SEVENTIES, LYDIA KESS

has a warm and wise presence and clarity of expression that flows naturally after thirty-nine years as a tax lawyer for the prestigious law firm Davis Polk & Wardwell. Coming of age at a time when few women were allowed entry into high-level professions, Lydia became Davis Polk's first female partner in 1971. Throughout her extraordinary career, she relied upon her intelligence and ambition to succeed despite the hurdles she faced.



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 de-

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.

termine 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 uncomfortable

The collage features several bottles and jars of Gold's Prepared Horseradish and Beets. The products shown include:

- A bottle of Gold's Prepared Horseradish (top right).
- A bottle of Gold's Prepared Horseradish (middle right).
- A jar of Gold's Prepared Horseradish and Beets (center).
- A jar of Gold's Prepared Horseradish (bottom center).
- A bottle of Gold's Prepared Horseradish (bottom right).
- A jar of Gold's Prepared Horseradish (bottom left).

 The words scattered around the products are:

- STRONG
- Good
- Traditional
- Green
- Pungent
- GOOD
- Tangy
- Hot
- GOOD
- Hot
- strong
- Good
- Mmmmmm
- Spicy
- Good
- Pungent
- Hot
- GOOD
- ORIGINAL
- green
- Good
- Spicy
- Pure
- Traditional
- Good
- Original

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'être* 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.



Esther Lejbovitz

AS TOLD TO TOVA ROSS

THIRTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD ESTHER LEJBOVITZ, who is expecting her third child, has a master's degree in special education. Working as a teacher in a special education preschool in Far Rockaway, New York, while raising her two lively children, Esther insists that "juggling career and family is doable . . . but children have to be a priority."