Winning Our Own Parenting Marathons

(And Sometimes Actual Ones)

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Do you ever look at other parents and wonder what their secrets are? How do they make it look easy to juggle parenting and everything else going on in their busy lives?

That's what went through my mind as I read about a woman named Cynthia Arnold, who made the news for her run at this year's Missoula Marathon. Cynthia ran the entire marathon while pushing her kids in a triple stroller. The stroller, plus kids, weighed roughly 185 pounds and she did it in record time – 3 hours and 11 minutes. Incredible!

I am in awe of anyone who runs a marathon, but especially a parent of young children. It takes incredible commitment to train over months and months to be ready for race day. You need time and energy, both of which are in short supply with kids, jobs, households, and every other responsibility. To run a marathon while maintaining a sub-7:20 pace with a six-, four-, and one-year-old in tow is just remarkable to me.

When my three kids were small, the last thing I was thinking about was breaking records. Getting to the end of the day, through dinner and baths and the nightly bedtime routine often felt like its own endurance race.

But, like other parents, I juggled parenting with work and family and taking on personal challenges that I wanted to do for myself. One of those challenges was to become a bat mitzvah.

I had turned down the chance to go to Hebrew school as a child. It was something I came to regret, especially as I was trying to pass on Jewish practices and traditions to my children. This pre-dated PJ Library; I didn't have Jewish books arriving at the door to help me. I knew that without some effort on my part, I would never understand the basics of Judaism and what it had to offer. It was time to take it on. And so I began a two-year course of study.

I wasn't alone. I studied with 10 other women, each of whom came to the class with their own stories. Some had been raised in other faiths and had become Jewish as adults. One woman had been raised in an Orthodox community where only boys participated in the coming-of-age ceremony. Most of the class had either skipped religious education altogether or had started in Hebrew school but dropped out. All of us were mothers, and most of us had young children at home. One woman brought her baby to class, and we took turns holding her so our friend could take notes.

Like the marathon runner, we each had our support system – friends, spouses, babysitters, family. We cheered each other on, just like the crowd that lined Cynthia's race. We found helpers, including our older children. There is a cute video clip, called "The Popsicle Moment," of Cynthia and her kids during the race. Someone from the sidelines hands Cynthia three popsicles as she runs by, and she passes them down to the kids. The youngest one can't quite figure out how to get past the plastic wrapper and starts to fuss and reach back to mom. Just then, six-year-old big sister Marguerite leans over to help. Marguerite knew to be ready to help with popsicles, games of I-spy, and other activities. It was something she and her mother had talked about and planned for, just in case.

I look back at the photos of me on the morning of my bat mitzvah, posing with my three young children, and I wonder how I managed to do it. I am sure my husband was a big help that morning as we got the kids dressed and ready, and we had a well-packed diaper bag with toys and snacks and books to keep everyone happy while I was up on the bima.

Like all busy parents, my classmates and I had our strategies and our helpers, and we continued to grow as people – both as parents and as individuals with our own ambitions. Becoming parents did not mean we gave up our personal goals; it just meant that we needed to plan well, prioritize, and squeeze in time for ourselves. As I look back, I am thankful that I took on my own personal challenge as I navigated those busy years with three small children by my side.