

A Set Table: Household Labor and Jewish Thought

Part II

Sarah Zager

I. Philosophical Background

“Then, turning from the consideration of such hindrances to the study of philosophy, Heloise bade me observe what were the conditions of honourable wedlock. What possible concord could there be between scholars and domestics, between authors and cradles, between books or tablets and distaffs, between the stylus or the pen and the spindle? What man, intent on his religious or philosophical meditations, can possibly endure the whining of children, the lullabies of the nurse seeking to quiet them, or the noisy confusion of family life? Who can endure the continual untidiness of children?”

-Peter Abelard, Historia Calamitatum

“Let us consider men...as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other.”

-Thomas Hobbes, De Cive

II. Sha”tz on a Fast Day

Mishnah Ta’anit 2:2	משנה תענית ב:ב
When they stand and pray, they are led by an elder who is fluent [in the prayers], has children, and whose house is empty, so that his heart will be full in prayer....	עמדו בתפלה, מורידין לפני התבה זקן ורגיל, ויש לו בנים, וביתו ריקם, כדי שיהא לבו שלם בתפלה....

Talmud Bavli, Ta’anit 16a	בבלי תענית, טז.
When they stand and pray, they are led by an elder... Our rabbis taught: When they stand and pray, even if there is a wise elder, they should only be led by someone who is fluent in the prayers. Who is fluent? Rabbi Yehudah says, “he cares [for children], and does not have enough, so he has to go to work in the field, and his house is empty.	עמדו בתפלה מורידין לפני התיבה זקן כו': תנו רבנן: עמדו בתפלה אע"פ שיש שם זקן וחכם אין מורידין לפני התיבה אלא אדם הרגיל. (איזהו רגיל) ר' יהודה אומר מטופל ואין לו ויש לו יגיעה בשדה וביתו ריקם
And his youth is becoming, and he is humble, and loved by the people—and he knows melodies, and his voice is pleasant, and he is a knowledgeable reader of Torah and Prophets, and Writings, and Midrash and Halakhah. And he knows all of the blessings.	ופרקו נאה, ושפל ברך, ומרוצה לעם—ויש לו נעימה וקולו ערב ובקי לקרות בתורה ובנביאים ובכתובים ולשנות במדרש בהלכות ובאגדות ובקי בכל הברכות כולן....

<p>He cares for children and does not have enough—Rav Hisda said: Someone whose house is empty from sin. And his youth is becoming—Abaye says, “That nothing bad was said about him in his childhood”</p>	<p>היינו מטופל ואין לו—היינו ביתו ריקם, אמר רב חסדא זהו שביתו ריקם מן העבירה: ופרקו נאה אמר אביי זה שלא יצא (לו) שם רע בילדותו</p>
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<p>Talmud Yerushalmi, Demai 3:3</p>	<p>ירושלמי דמאי ג:ג</p>
<p>It was taught in a baraita: “He can swear into the chavurah, and his children and the children of his house may swear for him. But there is another baraita: “He and his children and the children of his house all swear into the chavurah.” There is no dispute: Here it is talking about a case where the children are under their father’s care, and there it is talking about a case where the children are not under their father’s care.</p>	<p>תני הוא נענה לחבורה ובניו ובני ביתו נענין לו. אית תניי תני הוא ובניו ובני ביתו נענין לחבורה ולא פליג כאן בטפולין לאביהן וכאן כשאין טפולין לאביה</p>

<p>Talmud Yerushalmi, Ketubot 12:3</p>	<p>ירושלמי כתובות יב:ג</p>
<p>It is written, “Abandoned [freed] among the dead,” (Psalms 88:6), when a man dies he is made free from mitzvot. Rebi Tzvia [said] three things at the time when he was freed: “Do not move my widow from my house; do not mourn me in the cities, and the one who has cared for me in life will care for me when I die.”</p>	<p>כתיב במתים חפשי (תהילים פח) כיון שמת אדם נעשה חפשי מן המצות ר' ציוה שלשה דברים בשעת פטירתו אל תזוז אלמנתי מביתי ואל תספידוני בעיירות ומי שניטפל בי בחיי יטפל בי במותי</p>

III. Dayanut

<p>Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 36b</p>	<p>בבלי סנהדרין, לו:</p>
<p>We learn in a baraita: An elder, eunuch, or someone who does not have children cannot serve on a Sanhedrin. Rabbi Yehudah adds, even a wicked person. And the reverse is true for a rebellious person, because the Torah says, “Show him no pity or compassion, and do not shield him.” (Deut. 9:13).</p>	<p>דתניא אין מושיבין בסנהדרין זקן וסריס ומי שאין לו בנים ר' יהודה מוסיף אף אכזרי וחילופיהן במסית דרחמנא אמר (דברים יג, ט) לא תחמול ולא תכסה עליו:</p>

Rashi, Ad loc.	רש"י, שם
Elder—One who has already forgotten the pain of raising children and will not be merciful. And the same for a eunuch.	זקן - ששכח כבר צער גדול בנים ואינו רחמני וכן סריס:

Bavli Shabbat, 89b	בבלי שבת, פט:
Shmuel Bar Nachmani said that Rabbi Yonatan said, What does it mean when it is written, 'Surely You are our Father: Though Abraham regard us not, And Israel recognize us not, You, O LORD, are our Father; From of old, Your name is "Our Redeemer."' In the future, God will say to Abraham, 'Your children have sinned against me,' And Abraham will say before him 'Master of the universe, erase them, for the sanctification of your name.' He [God] said, 'I will say it to Jacob,' because Jacob had the pain of raising children, and he may ask for mercy on their behalf. And God said to him, 'Your children have sinned against me.' And Jacob said 'Master of the universe, erase them, for the sanctification of your name.' And God said 'Elders have no reason, and youths have no counsel.' And God said to Isaac, 'Your children have sinned against me.' And Isaac said, 'Master of the universe, are they my children and not yours?' At the time that they put 'we will do,' before 'we will hear,' the verse was said about them, 'My first born son' (Exodus 4:22). Now, are they are my children and not yours?"	א"ר שמואל בר נחמני א"ר יונתן מ"ד (ישעיה סג, טז) כי אתה אבינו כי אברהם לא ידענו וישראל לא יכירנו אתה ה' אבינו גואלנו מעולם שמך לעתיד לבא יאמר לו הקב"ה לאברהם בניך חטאו לי אמר לפניו רבש"ע ימחו על קדושת שמך אמר אימר ליה ליעקב דהוה ליה צער גידול בנים אפשר דבעי רחמי עלייהו אמר ליה בניך חטאו אמר לפניו רבש"ע ימחו על קדושת שמך אמר לא בסבי טעמא ולא בדדקאי עצה אמר לו ליצחק בניך חטאו לי אמר לפניו רבש"ע בני ולא בניך בשעה שהקדימו לפניך נעשה לנשמע קראת להם (שמות ד, כב) בני בכורי עכשיו בני ולא בניך

Bereshit Rabbah, Parashat Bereshit 20:6	בראשית רבה, פרשת בראשית כ:ו
"Your travail," that is the pain of conception, "your childbearing," that is the pain of "pregnancy," "in sadness," this is the pain of stillbirth, "you shall bear," "this is the pain of giving birth." "children," this is the pain of raising children. Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Shimon, "it is better for a	עצבונך זה צער של עיבור, והרונך זה צער העידוי, בעצב זה צער הנפלים, תלדי זה צער לידה, בנים זה צער גידול בנים, אמר ר' אלעזר בר' שמעון נוח לו לאדם לגדל ליגיון שלזיתים בגליל ולא לגדל תינוק אחד בארץ ישראל.

person to raise a grove of olive trees in the Galilee than to raise a single child in the land of Israel.	
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IV Other Kinds of situatedness: Hope and Longing as Care?

B. Shabbat 66b	בבלי שבת סב:
Mishnah: Boys may go out [into the public sphere on shabbat] with knots. And princes may go out with bells. And any person is permitted to go out [carrying these things]. They were merely speaking about things that were current practice.	מתני' הבנים יוצאין בקשרים ובני מלכים בזוגין וכל אדם אלא שדברו חכמים בהווה:...
... Our Rabbis taught 'One may go out with a preservation stone on the sabbath, according to Rabbi Meir.' They said 'even with a counterweight to the preservation stone [that has the same weight].' And not only someone who has previously miscarried, but also in case she does miscarry; and not only someone who is pregnant, but also in case she becomes pregnant and miscarry. Rabbi Simlai said in the name of Abaye, 'This applies only in a case where one finds a stone that is already the same weight [and not in a case where one cuts the stone to be the same weight].' Abaye asked, 'And what about a counterweight of a counterweight?' Let this dilemma stand unresolved.	... תנו רבנן יוצאין באבן תקומה בשבת משום רבי מאיר אמרו אף במשקל אבן תקומה ולא שהפילה אלא שמא תפיל ולא שעיברה אלא שמא תתעבר ותפיל אמר רב יימר בר שלמיא משמיה דאביי והוא דאיכוון ואיתקל בעי אביי משקל דמשקל מאי תיקו

B. Shabbat 66b	בבלי שבת סב:
But what are these knots? They are like what Rabbi Avin bar Huna said that Rabbi Chama bar Gurya: a son who longs his father takes the shoelace from his right shoe, and then ties it to his left hand. Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak said: and you can remember this because of the <i>Teffilin</i> [which are worn on the left arm].	אלא מאי קשרים כי הא דאמר אבין בר הונא אמר רבי חמא בר גוריא בן שיש געגועין על אביו נוטל רצועה ממנעל של ימין וקושר לו בשמאלו אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק וסימניך תפילין וחילופא סכנתא

Mara Benjamin, *The Obligated Self* (2018)

Jewish women, like many other women throughout the centuries, have intimately known their own distinctive form of boundedness and attachment: the boundedness of living with, being responsible for, and attending to children. As with tefillin, this boundedness is marked on the body: carved on muscles taut from the weight of carrying children; etched on the face in lines of sleeplessness, worry, and delight; engraved in the visceral response to the cry and needs of one's child. Child-rearing is a commitment in which love flows between mothers and children, and is expressed in the responsibility that women take in caring for their children. But whereas the male Jewish self is told, in the imperative, to bind himself to the words of God, a living human being gives maternal selves this imperative countless times a day, inscribing them with the dynamic Torah of their child.