

# A Set Table: Household Labor in Jewish Thought Part III

Source Sheet by Sarah Zager

## Introduction: Household Labor as a Metaphor for Judging

### Sanhedrin 8a:6

The Gemara continues to interpret verses pertaining to judges and judgment. **It is written: “And I charged your judges at that time”** (Deuteronomy 1:16), **and it is written** soon thereafter: **“And I commanded you at that time** all the things that you should do” (Deuteronomy 1:18). There is an apparent contradiction between these verses, as one indicates God commanded the judges and the other indicates He commanded the people. **Rabbi Elazar says that Rabbi Simlai says:** Moses issued a **warning to the community that the awe of the judge must be upon them, and** Moses issued a **warning to the judge that he must bear** the burden of **the community. Up to what** degree must the judge bear this burden? **Rabbi Hanan, and some say Rabbi Shabbtai, says:** It is as Moses said, that he carried Israel **“as a nursing father carries**

### סנהדרין ח' א:ו'

כתיב (דברים א, טז) ואצוה את שופטיכם בעת ההיא וכתיב (דברים א, יח) ואצוה אתכם בעת ההיא אמר רבי אלעזר אמר רבי שמלאי אזהרה לציבור שתהא אימת דיין עליהן ואזהרה לדיין שיסבול את הציבור עד כמה אמר רבי חנן ואיתימא רבי שבתאי (במדבר יא, יב) כאשר ישא האומן את היונק

the sucking child” (Numbers 11:12).

Numbers 11:11-14

(11) And Moses said to the Lord, “Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me?

(12) Did I produce all this people, did I engender them, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a caregiver carries an infant,’ to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers?

(13) Where am I to get meat to give to all this people, when they whine before me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’

(14) I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me.

במדבר י"א:א-י"ד

(יא) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה לָמָּה הִרְעַלְתָּ לְעַבְדְּךָ וְלָמָּה לֹא־מָצַתִּי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ לְשׂוֹם אֶת־מִשְׁאַ כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה עָלַי:

(יב) הֲאֵנֹכִי הָרִיתִי אֶת כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה אִם־אֲנֹכִי יִלְדֵתִיהוּ כִּי־תֹאמַר אֵלַי שְׂאֵהוּ בְּחִיקְךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר יִשָּׂא הָאִמּוֹן אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְתָּיו:

(יג) מֵאִיִּן לִי בָשָׂר לָתֵת לְכָל־הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי־יִבְכּוּ עָלַי לֵאמֹר תִּנְהַלְנוּ בָשָׂר וְנֹאכְלָהּ:

(יד) לֹא־אוּכַל אֲנֹכִי לְבַדִּי לְשַׂאת אֶת־כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי כָבֵד מִמֶּנִּי:

Rabbinic Debates about Breastfeeding

Mishnah Ketubot 5:5

(5) **And these are tasks that a wife must perform for her husband: She grinds wheat into flour, and bakes, and washes clothes, cooks, and nurses her child, makes her husband’s bed, and makes thread from wool by spinning it. If she**

משנה כתובות ה:ה'

(ה) אֵלוֹן מְלָאכּוֹת שֶׁהָאִשָּׁה עוֹשָׂה לְבַעֲלָהּ, טוֹחֶנֶת, וְאוֹפָה, וּמְכַבֶּסֶת, מְבַשְׁלֶת, וּמִנִּיקָה אֶת בְּנָהּ, מִצְעֶת לוֹ הַמָּטָה, וְעוֹשָׂה בְצֻמָּה. הַכְנִיסָה לוֹ שֶׁפָּחָה אַחַת, לֹא טוֹחֶנֶת, וְלֹא אוֹפָה וְלֹא מְכַבֶּסֶת. שְׁתֵּי־ם, אֵינָה מְבַשְׁלֶת

**brought him one maidservant**, i.e., brought the maidservant with her into the marriage, the maidservant will perform some of these tasks. Consequently, the wife **does not need to grind, and does not need to bake, and does not need to wash clothes**. If she brought him **two** maidservants, **she does not need to cook and does not need to nurse her child** if she does not want to, but instead may give the child to a wet nurse. If she brought him **three** maidservants, **she does not need to make his bed and does not need to make thread from wool**. If she brought him **four** maidservants, **she may sit in a chair [katedra]** like a queen and not do anything, as her maidservants do all of her work for her. **Rabbi Eliezer says: Even if she brought him a hundred maidservants, he can compel her to make thread from wool, since idleness leads to licentiousness**. Consequently, it is better for a woman to be doing some kind of work. **Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: Even one who vows that his wife is prohibited from doing any work must divorce her and give her the payment for her marriage contract, since idleness leads to idiocy**.

וְאִינָה מְנִיקָה אֶת בְּנָהּ. שְׁלֵשׁ, אִינָה  
מִצְעֵת לּוֹ הַמָּטָה וְאִינָה עוֹשֶׂה בְּצִמּוֹר.  
אַרְבָּעָה, יוֹשֶׁבֶת בְּקִתְדְרָא. רַבִּי  
אֶלְיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר, אֶפְלוּ הַכְנִיסָה לּוֹ  
מֵאָה שְׁפָחוֹת, כּוֹפֶה לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּצִמּוֹר,  
שֶׁהַבְּטָלָה מְבִיאָה לַיָּדֵי זָמָה. רַבִּין  
שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר, אִף הַמְדִיר  
אֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ מִלַּעֲשׂוֹת מְלָאכָה, יוֹצִיא  
וְיִתֵּן כְּתֻבָּתָהּ, שֶׁהַבְּטָלָה מְבִיאָה  
לַיָּדֵי שְׁעִמוּם:

### Tosefta Ketubot 5:3

Rabbi Yehudah says: He also can't force her to work with flax since it lacerates the mouth and stiffens the lips. If she vowed to not nurse her son, Beit Shammai say: Remove her breast from his mouth! But Beit Hillel say: He can force her to nurse; if she is divorced, they cannot force her to nurse; if [she is divorced but] her son recognises her, they pay her wages and she nurses him because of the danger [to the child since he may not accept breast milk from another woman]. A man cannot force his wife to nurse the son of his fellow, and a wife can't force her husband [to allow her to] nurse the son of her fellow.

### Ketubot 61a:2-3

§ **Rav Huna said: Rav Huna bar Hinnana tested us**, by asking: **If she says** that she wants **to nurse and he says** that he **does not** want her **to nurse** but rather to give the child to a wet nurse, **we accede to her** desires, as **she is the one suffering**. However, if **he says** that he wants her **to nurse and she says** that she does **not** want **to nurse**, **what is** the *halakha*? He then narrowed the scope of the question: **Anywhere**

### תוספתא כתובות ה'ג'

ר' יהודה אומר אף אין כופה לעשות [פשתן מפני שמסריח את הפה] ומשרביט את השפתים נדרה שלא להניק את בנה ב"ש אומרים שומטת [את דדיה] ובית הלל אומרים כופה [אותה] נתגרשה אין כופין אותה להניק אם היה בנה מכירה נותנין לה [שכר] ומניקתו מפני הסכנה. אין האיש כופה את אשתו שתניק את בן חבירו ואין האשה כופה את בעלה שתניק את בן חברתה.

### כתובות ס"א א:ב'-ג'

אמר רב הונא בְּדַק לֵן רַב הוֹנָא בְּרַ חִינָנָא הִיא אוֹמֶרֶת לְהִנִּיק וְהוּא אוֹמֶר שְׁלֵא לְהִנִּיק שׁוֹמְעִין לָהּ צִעֲרָא דִּידָהּ הוּא הוּא אוֹמֶר לְהִנִּיק וְהִיא אוֹמֶרֶת שְׁלֵא לְהִנִּיק מְהוּ כֹּל הֵיכָא דְלָאו אוֹרְחָהּ שׁוֹמְעִין לָהּ הִיא אוֹרְחָהּ וְהוּא לָאו אוֹרְחָהּ מֵאֵי בְּתַר דִּידָהּ אֲזֵלִינָן אוֹ בְּתַר דִּידָהּ אֲזֵלִינָן וּפְשִׁיטָנָא לִיהּ מְהָא עוֹלָה עִמּוּ וְאִינָהּ

**that she is not accustomed,** we accede to her desires. However, **if she is accustomed** to nursing **and he is not accustomed,** what is the *halakha*: Do **we follow his** wishes to follow her family custom **or do we follow her** wishes to follow his family custom? **And we answered his** question **from this** amoraic statement: When a woman marries a man, **she ascends with him** to his socioeconomic status, if it is higher than hers, **but she does not descend with him** if his status is lower....**Rabbi Elazar said:** There is a hint to this principle **from here:** **“As she was the mother of all living”** (Genesis 3:20), which indicates that **she was given** to her husband **for living** with him, **but was not given to** suffer **pain** with him.

**Rashi on Ketubot 61a:2:1**

It is her pain—She has a lot of milk in her breasts and it is painful for her

**Mishneh Torah, Marriage 21:12-13**

(12) If she gives birth to twins, we do not force her to nurse both of them. Rather, she nurses one of them and

יִוְרְדַת עִמּוֹ רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר אָמַר מִהֲכֵא  
כִּי הִיא הִיְתָה אִם כָּל חַי לְחַיִּים  
נִיְתָנָה וְלֹא לְצַעַר נִיְתָנָה

**רש"י על כתובות ס"א א:ב:א'**

צערא דידה הוא - החלב רב בדדיה  
ומצערה:

**משנה תורה, הלכות אישות**

**כ"א:י"ב-י"ג**

(יב) יְלָדָה תְּאוּמִים אֵין כּוֹפִין אוֹתָהּ

the husband hires someone to nurse the second. If a woman wants to nurse her friend's child along with her own, the husband can intervene and stop her, so that she only nurses her own child.

(13) If she takes a vow not to nurse, we do not force her, [and a wet nurse] is hired until the child is 24 months old, whether the child is male or female. If she says, 'I want to nurse my child,' but he does not want her to nurse because he does not want her to become ugly, even if she has several maidservants, we listen to her, because it is painful for her to separate from her child.

לְהִינִיק שְׁנֵיהֶם אֶלָּא מִינִיקָה אֶחָד  
וְשׁוֹכֵר הַבַּעַל מִינִיקָה לְשָׁנֵי הָרִי  
שָׂרָצְתָה הָאִשָּׁה לְהִינִיק בֶּן חֲבֵרְתָהּ  
עִם בְּנֵה הַבַּעַל מֵעַכָּב וְאִינוּ מִנִּיקָה  
אֶלָּא לְהִינִיק בְּנוֹ בְּלִבָּד:  
(יג) נִדְרָה שְׁלֵא לְהִינִיק אֶת בְּנֵה  
כּוֹפֶה אוֹתָהּ וּמִינִיקָתוֹ עַד שְׁיִהְיֶה בֶּן  
כ"ד חֳדָשׁ אֶחָד הַזָּכֵר וְאֶחָד הַנְּקֵבָה.  
הִיא אוֹמֶרֶת אֲנִי אֵינִיק אֶת בְּנִי וְהוּא  
אֵינוֹ רוֹצֶה שְׁתִּינִיק אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּדֵּי שְׁלֵא  
תִתְנַגֵּל אַף עַל פִּי שְׂיִישׁ לָהּ כַּמָּה  
שְׂפָחוֹת שׁוֹמְעִין לָהּ שְׂצַעֵר הוּא לָהּ  
לְפָרֵשׁ מִבְּנֵה:

## Surrogacy as a Model for Messianic Hope

### Ruth 4:14-17

(14) And the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not withheld a redeemer from you today! May his name be perpetuated in Israel!

(15) He will renew your life and sustain your old age; for he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons.”

(16) Naomi took the child and held it to her bosom. She became its foster

### רות ד': י"ד-י"ז

(יד) וַתֹּאמְרֵנָה הַנָּשִׁים אֶל-נְעֻמִי  
בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִשְׁבִּית לָךְ  
גֹּאֵל הַיּוֹם וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:  
(טו) וְהָיָה לָךְ לְמַשְׁיב נֶפֶשׁ וּלְכֹלְכֵל  
אֶת-שִׁיבְתֶךָ כִּי כָלְתָךְ אֲשֶׁר-אֶהְבֶּתְךָ  
יִלְדֶתוּ אֲשֶׁר-הִיא טוֹבָה לָךְ מִשִּׁבְעָה  
בָּנִים:  
(טז) וַתִּקַּח נְעֻמִי אֶת-הַיֶּלֶד וַתִּשְׁתְּהוּ  
בְחִיקָהּ וַתְּהִי-לוֹ לְאִמָּנָה:

mother,  
 (17) and the women neighbors gave  
 him a name, saying, “A son is born  
 to Naomi!” They named him Obed;  
 he was the father of Jesse, father of  
 David.

(יז) וַתִּקְרָאנָהּ לּוֹ הַשְּׂכֵנֹת שֵׁם  
 לְאֹמֶר יֶלֶד-בֵּן לְנַעֲמִי וַתִּקְרָאנָה שְׁמוֹ  
 עֹבֵד הוּא אֲבִי-יֵשׁוּ אֲבִי דָוִד: {פ}

**Mara Benjamin, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity in Jewish Thought***

The idyllic, even utopian, character of the ending is indicated by the genealogy in the final verses, which points to the messianic redemption. But beyond the ending, the joy and dignity in Naomi’s actions have a redemptive quality. Naomi is a woman for whom the status of ‘omenet is freely chosen. Clearly, this is not the operative reality for most nannies and babysitters; their role will only rarely, if ever, be as fully integrated into the self-perception of the family as is Naomi’s with Ruth, Boaz, and the larger social world of their community. The nanny may be a de facto co-mother or even primary mother in her own eyes and in the eyes of the child for whom she cares—but is not officially recognized as such by the parents or the social world beyond them. The idyll of Naomi and Ruth reorients our vision. To take the narrative seriously is to envision a different social world than one that is, like ours, organized around exploitation. With Ruth and Naomi, we envision a world in which a person might choose to care for a child alongside its parents, and in which the parents and the larger society would recognize caring labor as creating familial bonds.

**Isaiah 49:20-22**

(20) The children you thought you  
 had lost<sup>e</sup>  
 Shall yet say in your hearing,  
 “The place is too crowded for me;  
 Make room for me to settle.” (21)  
 And you will say to yourself,  
 “Who bore these for me

**ישעיהו מ"ט:כ"ב-כ"ב**

(כ) עוֹד יֹאמְרוּ בְּאָזְנוֹיָךְ בְּנֵי שְׂכָלְיָךְ  
 צָרָתִי הִמָּקוֹם גְּשָׁה-לִּי וְאַשְׁבָּה:  
 (כא) וְאָמַרְתָּ בְּלִבְיָךְ מִי יֶלֶד-לִי  
 אֶת-אֵלֶּה וְאֲנִי שְׂכוּלָה וְגִלְמוּדָה  
 גְּלָהּ וְסוּרָה וְאֵלֶּה מִי גִדְּלָהּ הֲאֵן אֲנִי

When I was bereaved and barren,  
 Exiled and disdained—  
 By whom, then, were these reared?  
 I was left all alone—  
 And where have these been?”  
 (22) Thus said the Lord GOD:  
 I will raise My hand to nations  
 And lift up My ensign to peoples;  
 And they shall bring your sons in  
 their bosoms,  
 And carry your daughters on their  
 backs.

נִשְׁאַרְתִּי לְבַדִּי אֵלֶּה אֵיפָה הֵם: {פ}  
 (כב) כָּה־אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה הַגֵּה  
 אֶשְׂא אֶל־גּוֹיִם יָדַי וְאֶל־עַמִּים אָרְזִים  
 נִסִּי וְהִבִּיאוּ בְנֵיהֶם בְּחֶזֶן וּבְנִתְיָהֶם  
 עַל־כַּתְּפֵי תַנְשִׂאנָה:

**Pesikta D'Rav Kahanna 20:1**

‘[Setting] the childless woman  
 among her household as a happy  
 mother of children’ (Psalms 113:9).  
 There are seven childless women:  
 Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, as  
 well as Manoach’s wife, Hannah,  
 and Zion. Or, another interpretation:  
 ‘[setting] the childless woman,’  
 refers to Sarah, our mother, ‘Now  
 Sarai was barren,’ (Genesis 11:30). ‘A  
 happy mother of children,’ refers to  
 ‘That Sarah would suckle children’  
 (Genesis 21:7). Or, another  
 interpretation: ‘[Setting] the  
 childless woman,’ refers to Rebecca,  
 ‘Isaac pleaded with the LORD on  
 behalf of his wife, because she was  
 barren’ (Genesis 25:21), ‘A happy  
 mother of children,’ refers to ‘and  
 the LORD responded to his plea, and

**פסיקתא דרב כהנא כ"א'**

(א) רני עקרה.  
 [א] מושיבי עקרת הבית אם הבנים  
 שמחה (תהלים קיג:ט). שבע  
 עקרות הן, שרה רבקה רחל ולאה  
 ואשתו של מנוח וחסנה וציון. ד"א  
 מושיבי עקרת הבית (שם), זו  
 אימינו שרה, ותהי שרי עקרה  
 (בראשית יא:ל). אם הבנים שמחה  
 (תהלים שם), הניקה בנים שרה  
 (בראשית כא:ז). ד"א מושיבי עקרת  
 הבית (תהלים שם), זו רבקה,  
 ויעתר יצחק ל"י לנכח אשתו כי  
 עקרה היא (בראשית כה:כא). אם  
 הבנים שמחה (תהלים שם), ויעתר  
 לו י"י ותהר רבקה אשתו (בראשית  
 שם). ד"א מושיבי עקרת הבית



his wife Rebekah conceived' (Genesis 25:21). Or, another interpretation: '[setting] the childless woman,' refers to Leah, 'The LORD saw that Leah was unloved and he opened her womb' (Genesis 29:31), from here we learn that Leah was without children. 'A happy mother of children,' refers to 'for I have borne him six sons' (Genesis 30:20). Or, another interpretation: '[setting] the childless woman,' refers to Rachel, 'but Rachel was barren.' 'A happy mother of children,' refers to 'The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin' (Genesis 35:24). Or, another interpretation: "[setting] the childless woman," refers to Manoach's Wife, 'An angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, "You are barren and have borne no children"' (Judges 13:3). 'A happy mother of children,' refers to 'you shall conceive and bear a son' (Judges 13:3). Or, another interpretation: '[setting] the childless woman,' refers to Hannah, 'Peninah had children, but Hannah was childless,' (I Samuel 1:2). 'A happy mother of children,' refers to 'Hannah conceived and bore three sons and two daughters' (I Samuel 2:21). Or, another interpretation: '[setting] the childless woman,' refers to Zion, as it says 'Shout, O

(תהלים שם), זו לאה, וירא י"י כי שנואה לאה ויפתח את רחמה (בראשית כט:לא), מיכן שהיתה לאה עקרה. אם הבנים שמחה (תהלים שם), כי ילדתי לו ששה בנים (בראשית ל:כ). ד"א מושיבי עקרת הבית (תהלים שם), זו רחל, ורחל עקרה (בראשית כט:לא). אם הבנים שמחה (תהלים שם), בני רחל יוסף ובנימין (בראשית לה:כד). ד"א מושיבי עקרת הבית (תהלים שם), זו אשתו של מנוח, וירא מלאך י"י אל האשה ויאמר אליה הנה נא את עקרה ולא ילדת (שופטים יג:ג). אם הבנים שמחה (תהלים שם), והרית וילדת בן (שופטים שם). ד"א מושיבי עקרת הבית (תהלים קיג:ט), זו חנה, ויהי לפנינה ילדים ולחנה אין ילדים (שמואל א' א:ב). אם הבנים שמחה (תהלים קיג:ט), ותהר ותלד שלשה בנים ושתי בנות (שמואל א' ב:כא). ד"א מושיבי עקרת הבית, (תהלים שם), זו ציון, רני עקרה לא ילדה (ישעיה נד:א). אם הבנים שמחה, ואמרת בלבבך מי ילד לי את אלה וג' (ישעיה מט:כא).

barren one, You who bore no child!  
(Isaiah 54:1), 'A happy mother of  
children,' refers to 'Who bore these  
for me When I was bereaved and  
barren' (Isiah 49:21).

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