

**Caring for Others, the Torah, and Ourselves: Jewish Perspectives on the Ethics of Care
Session 3: Caring for Those We Miss or Hope For**

I Tefillin and Embodied Obligation

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

The weekday morning ritual of tefillin practiced by religiously observant Jews stages the key narrative of the people of Israel. During prayer, small boxes containing words of scripture are wrapped with black leather straps to one arm and the crown of one's head. The daily act of quite literally placing the words of Torah on the body is understood as a fulfillment of the biblical command to study and remember words of Torah in the midst of daily life: "Bind [these words] as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol between your eyes; inscribe them on the doorposts [mezuzot] of your house and on your gates" (Deut. 6:8). Binding the body in Torah affirms God's redemption of the Jewish people. To be a Jew is not to be free from constraint; rather, it is regularly to experience the movement from ignoble bondage in Egypt ('avdut) to service ('avodah): "For unto Me the children of Israel are servants; they are My servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: I am YHVH your God" (Lev. 25:55).¹ By wrapping oneself in tefillin, the worshipper reenacts this narrative and assents to it.

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. Men's subjection is aspirational and metaphysical; women's, genuine and concrete.

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: ...
B. Shabbat 66b	בבלי שבת סב:
But what are these knots? They are like what Rabbi Avin bar Huna said that	אלא מאי קשרים כי הא דאמר אבין בר הונא אמר רבי חמא בר גוריא בן שיש געגועין על אביו נוטל רצועה

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].	ממנעל של ימין וקושר לו בשמאלו אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק וסימניך תפילין וחילופא סכנתא
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B. Shabbat 66b	בבלי שבת סב:
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 דאיכונן ואיתקל בעי אביי משקל דמשקל מאי תיקו

II Expectant Care as a Model for Redemption

Isaiah 54:1 (trans. NJPS)	ישעיהו נד:א
Shout, O barren one, You who bore no child! Shout aloud for joy, You who did not travail! For the children of the wife forlorn Shall outnumber those of the espoused —said the LORD.	רְנִי עֲקָרָה לֹא יִלְדָה פְּצוּחֵי רִגְהָ וְצָהֲלִי לֹא-חֶלֶה כִּי-רַבִּים בְּנֵי-שׁוֹמְמָה מִבְּנֵי בְּעוּלָה אָמַר ה':

Psalms 113:9 (trans. Alter)	תהלים קיג:ט
He seats the barren woman in her home A happy mother of sons Hallelujah.	מוֹשִׁיבֵי עֲלֶקְרֵת הַבָּיִת אִם-הַבְּנִים שְׂמֹחַה הַקְּלוּ-יָהּ:

Pesikta d'Rav Kahanah 20:1	פסיקתא דרב כהנא כ:א
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'[seating] 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: **'[seating] 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: **'[seating] 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 his wife Rebekah conceived' (Genesis 25:21).

Or, another interpretation: **'[seating] 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: **'[seating] 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: **"[seating 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: **'[seating the childless woman,'** refers to Hannah, 'Peninah had children, but Hannah was childless,' (I Samuel 1:2).

'A happy mother of children,' refers to

רני עקרה.
מושיבי עקרת הבית אם הבנים שמחה (תהלים קיג:ט).
שבע עקרות הן, שרה רבקה רחל ולאה ואשתו של
מנוח וחנה וציון.

ד"א מושיבי עקרת הבית (תהלים 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 (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 ובנימן
(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).

<p>'Hannah] conceived and bore three sons and two daughters' (I Samuel 2:21).</p> <p>Or, another interpretation: '[seating] the childless woman,' refers to Zion, as it says 'Shout, O 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' (Isaiah 49:21).</p>	<p>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).</p>
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Isaiah 49:21	ישעיה מט:כא
<p>Swiftly your children are coming; Those who ravaged and ruined you shall leave you.</p> <p>Look up all around you and see: They are all assembled, are come to you! As I live — declares the LORD— You shall don them all like jewels, Deck yourself with them like a bride.</p> <p>As for your ruins and desolate places And your land laid waste— You shall soon be crowded with settlers, While destroyers stay far from you.</p> <p>The children you thought you had lost Shall yet say in your hearing, "The place is too crowded for me; Make room for me to settle."</p> <p>And you will say to yourself, "Who bore these for me 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?"</p>	<p>מהרו בניה מהרסי ומהרביה ממך יצאו: שאי־סביב עיניך וראי כלם נקבצו באו־לך חי־אני נאם־ יהוה כי כלם קעדי תלבשי ותקשרים כפלה: כי חרבתיך ושמתיה וארץ הרסתיך כי עתה תצרי מיושב ורחקו מבלעיה עוד יאמרו באזניה בני שכליה צר־לי המקום גשה־לי ואשבה: ואמרת בלבבך מי ילד־לי את־אלה ואני שכולה וגלמונה גלה וסונה ואלה מי גדל הן אני נשארת לבדי אלה איפה הם: (פ)</p>

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Yet if the alterity of my child cannot be apprehended without the backdrop of the familiar and vice versa, so too might we say that the command my child issues and the responsibility I have toward her can only be comprehended through intimacy. Children's needs and abilities can be plotted in the abstract, but the distinctive needs of any given child determines the command she issues. The specific command can only be heard in the immediacy of one's particular child at a particular moment (87).

Coda Re-reading our Starting Midrash:

Exodus Rabbah 23:8	שמות רבה כג:ח
<p>Rabbi Yehudah said: Who said praise to God [at the sea]? The babies that Pharaoh had decreed to be thrown into the Nile, because they knew God.</p> <p>How is this so? When Israel was in Egypt, and one of the women of the children of Israel was ready to give birth, she would go out into the field and give birth there. And once she gave birth, she would leave the child and hand him over to God. And she would say: 'I did my part, now you do yours.'</p> <p>Rabbi Yochanan said: At once, it was as if God in God's honor came down and cut their umbilical chords, and washed them and wrapped then annointed them [with oil], and so it says in Ezekiel: "on the day you were born, you were left lying, rejected, in the open field" (Ezekiel 16:5), and it also says "As for your birth, when you were born your umbilical cord was not cut" (Ezekiel 16:4), and "I clothed you with embroidered garments," (Ezekiel 16:10), and "I bathed you in water" (Ezekiel 16:9).</p> <p>And God would suckle them with milk in one hand and honey in the other, as it says "He fed him honey from the rock," (Deut. 32:13), and they grew in the field, as it says "I let you grow like the plants of the field" (Ezekiel 16:7).</p> <p>And when they had grown, they went to their parent's houses, and their parents asked them: "Who took care of you?" And they answered: "A fine-looking and praiseworthy young man, came down and took care of everything that we needed, as it says "My beloved is clear-skinned and ruddy, Preeminent among ten thousand" (Song of Songs 5:10).</p> <p>And when the Israelites came to the sea, these children were there, and they saw God was in the sea, and they started to say to their parents: "This is the one who did all of those things for us when we were in Egypt," as it says "This is my God and I will enshrine Him" (Exod. 15:2)</p>	<p>רבי יהודה אומר, מי אמר קלויס להקדוש ברוך הוא? התינוקות, אותן שהיה פרעה מבקש להשליך לנילוס שהם מכירין להקדוש ברוך הוא.</p> <p>כיצד? כשהיו ישראל במצרים והיתה אשה מבנות ישראל מבקשת לילד, והיתה יוצאת לשדה ויולדת שם, וכיון שהיתה יולדת, עוזבת הנער ומוסרת אותו להקדוש ברוך הוא, ואמרת רבון העולם, אני עשיתי את שלי ואתה עשה את שלך.</p> <p>אמר רבי יוחנן, מיד היה יורד הקדוש ברוך הוא בכבודו ככבודו וחותה טבורן ומרחיצן וסכו, וכן יחזקאל אמר (יחזקאל טז, ה): ותשליכי אל פני השדה בגעל נפשך, וכתוב (יחזקאל טז, ד): ומולדותיך ביום הולדת אותך לא כרת שרך, וכתוב (יחזקאל טז, י): ואלבשך רקמה, וכתוב (יחזקאל טז, ט): וארחצך במים.</p> <p>והיה נותן שני טגרין בידו אחד מניקו שמן ואחד מניקו דבש, שנאמר (דברים לב, יג): וינקהו דבש מסלע, והיו גדלים בשדה, שנאמר (יחזקאל טז, ז): רבבה כצמח השדה ונתתיה,</p> <p>וכיון שהיו גדלין היו נכנסין לבתיהן אצל אבותיהן והיו שואלין להם מי היה זקוק לכם, והיו אומרים להם בחור אחד נאה ומשבח היה יורד ועושה לנו כל צרכינו, שנאמר (שיר השירים ה, י): דודי צח ואדום דגול מרובה.</p> <p>וכיון שבאו ישראל לים היה אותן התינוקות שם והם ראו להקדוש ברוך הוא בים התחילו אומרים לאבותיהם זהו אותו שהיה עושה לנו כל אותן הדברים כשהיינו במצרים, שנאמר: זה אלי ואנוהו.</p>

