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Mothers in the Jewish Cultural Imagination

Edited by
MARJORIE LEHMAN
JANE L. KANAREK AND
SIMON J. BRONNER

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SEVENTEEN

On Teachers, Rabbinic and Maternal

MARA H. BENJAMIN

In the wake of dislocation and upheaval, the Sages of classical Judaism undertook an ambitious project of cultural production that centred on the reformulation of Torah within a new discipleship community. The relationship between master and disciple, teacher and student, became a critical context for rabbinic creativity and, as such, was a site of considerable cultural investment. The master and disciple, bound by their mutual devotion to explicating Torah, formed a relationship that would mediate and reinvent the teachings of the elders for the current and future community of rabbinic Jews. The magnitude of this relationship for the rabbinic project is evident in parental metaphors that recur throughout rabbinic literature describing the connection between master and disciple. Buttressing this extravagant language are the many explicit early rabbinic traditions asserting the sage's role to be equivalent to or even greater than that of the social (that is, the familial or biological) parent.

Feminist attention to gender and embodiment has led a number of scholars to attend to the engenderment of this construct of master and disciple, and to examine in particular the rabbis' mobilization of metaphorical 'parenthood' from the perspective of the male community of Sages (Boyarin 1993; Eilberg-Schwartz 1994). In this essay, I focus on the other side of that metaphor. I investigate the implications of the rabbis' appropriation of maternal and paternal language for *actual* parents and for *non-metaphorical* parenthood. I argue that the rabbis' construction of the master–student relationship in terms equivalent to the father–son relationship yields a problematic legacy for the conception of parenthood in Jewish discourse, one that marginalizes the very bond it appropriates. Yet this construction of 'parenthood' as constituted by teaching Torah also contains enormous potential for the task of rendering parenthood both visible and valued within a Jewish framework. Here I retrieve the possibilities latent within the rabbinic insistence on teaching-as-parenting by turning the rabbinic metaphor on its head: rather than the rabbinic master as metaphorical parent, I propose we imagine the parent who is engaged in routine acts of care and childrearing as the metaphorical sage. Likewise, in contrast with the ritual and intellectual understanding of Torah espoused in rabbinic texts, I posit an expansive meaning of

'Torah' that is grasped and transmitted in the quotidian work of caring for young children.

To make such an assertion is to claim that the repetitive, daily tasks of child-rearing constitute a kind of teaching that undergirds, and perhaps even constitutes, the transmission of Torah. In my constructive proposal, I use the gender-neutral or gender-inclusive term 'parents' to speak about the potential participants in relationships of daily care and teaching. But such a term does not suit the highly gendered rabbinic texts that I treat below, nor does it do justice to the fact that, for centuries, this kind of work was (and largely remains, even in the United States) the domain of women.[1] Thus I speak primarily of 'maternal teaching' and 'maternal work'. I do not use this language prescriptively, nor do I wish to reinscribe women's relegation to the role of 'primary' childcare provider. Instead, I wish to revalue and examine a possible meaning of the daily care for children in which, in general, mothers and not fathers, or at least women and not men, have engaged. I will suggest that a full encounter with Torah, for men and women, can best be achieved by means of relationships of response and responsibility, the paradigmatic embodiment of which occurs in quotidian parental care. As such, this caregiving work should be reintegrated into the very meaning of Torah itself.

This endeavour participates in the ongoing effort among feminists to continue to transform Judaism's patriarchal foundations and so create new possibilities for a humane and inclusive future. It is striking that the key theological texts of Jewish feminism (Adler 1998; Plaskow 1991), which made possible the scholarly attention to gender in rabbinic culture on which I build, have largely ignored maternal questions. I seek to introduce the maternal as a question for Jewish feminist thought. I build on this intellectual movement to document the parallel and intersecting traditions of women and other non-elite groups that have always existed alongside normative Judaism as transmitted by authorized figures (Boustan, Kosansky, and Rustow 2011; Sered 1992; Weissler 1998). As Sered has argued, the authority of texts in normative Judaism means that 'the anthropology of Jewish women is the anthropology of women who stand in relationship of some sort (worshipful, antagonistic, creative) to Jewish texts. The anthropological challenge, as I see it, is to explore the nature of that relationship' (Sered 1995: 216).

The challenge Sered has articulated belongs no less to the realm of Jewish theology and thought than it does to the realm of anthropology. Here I neither dispense with traditional Jewish texts and thought nor seek simply to expand the androcentric tradition by giving it an egalitarian gloss for contemporary practitioners. Rather, I locate maternity as an area of experience through which traditional religious practices can be redefined . To do so, I critically examine and creatively reconstruct the textual traditions of normative Judaism, drawing on a

hermeneutics of suspicion and of retrieval. My hope is that this double move will enable a ubiquitous but marginalized element of human experience to become available as a religiously relevant site.

Classical Judaism, in which later Jewish tradition located the sources for its normative practices, placed at its centre the figure of the teacher or sage (rabbi, *ḥakham*), the disciple, and the mutually binding activity of Torah study. While most contemporary scholars now recognize that the Sages were a politically marginal group with limited influence and little power in late antiquity (Schwartz 2001), their traditions nonetheless articulated the cultural logic of Torah study in powerful ways for later Jewish cultures.

Increasingly, scholars understand the practices of the Sages, particularly in the influential Babylonian community, as those of a semi- (or aspirationally) ascetic, homosocial discipleship community that stood in tension with women and the familial and worldly responsibilities marriage signified (Boyarin 1993; Diamond 2004; Fraade 1986; Satlow 2003; Schofer 2004). This tension emerged, in part, by virtue of the construction of the rabbinic circle as what Martin Jaffee has called 'a reconstruction of the parent–child relationship in a non-familial instructional setting'. In such a discipleship community, 'Teachers are not biologically the mothers or fathers, the grandparents, uncles, or aunts of their pupils, and they do not normally relate to their pupils as kin. But in a system of discipleship the teacher bears for each student a responsibility appropriate to that of kin—particularly the father or mother—or even replac[es] it.' This attempt to replace the pupil's social and familial upbringing intended to help disciples 'repattern' their habits of mind and action: 'whereas the child is formed through emulation of the adult kin, the disciple's task of emulation involves absorbing the teaching of a master in such a way as to embody the master's own human achievement'. In the context of rabbinic Judaism, Jaffee argues, face-to-face transmission and mimetic learning were the ways in which the promise of 'Torah in the mouth' was to be realized. When successful, 'the Rabbinic Sage was Torah transformed into an embodied form of human being' (Jaffee 1997: 530, 541).

The rabbis' insistent use of paternal and parental metaphors to describe the relationship between sage and disciple testifies to this idea of the community of teachers and learners as the locus of proper socialization. Throughout tannaitic and amoraic literature, we find the claim that the master is the 'true' parent of the disciple. The 'natural' father merely gives the raw material for life, whereas the master gives this creation its form and brings it to its ultimate purpose: Torah.

In keeping with this ethos, the Sages utilize the appearances of 'father' and 'son' in the biblical text as locutions for the rabbinic master and his disciple. To choose but one example from *Sifrei* on Deuteronomy ('Va'eṯḥanan' 34):

'Your children' [Deut. 11: 19]: these are your pupils. And thus you find that pupils are always called sons, as it says, 'And the sons of the prophets that were in the house went

out to Elisha' [2 Kgs 2: 3]. Were these the prophets' sons? [No!] They were their pupils! From this we know that pupils are called sons. . . . and just as pupils are called 'sons', so the master is called 'father'.[2]

When the biblical text speaks of 'children' (or, perhaps, only of sons, *beneikhem*), the *Sifrei* insists that it is referring to students, a pattern that recurs throughout this midrashic interpretation of Deuteronomy (Fraade 1991: 77). Such a text exerts virtually no exegetical effort to claim that the biblical text 'really' speaks about the sage and his disciple rather than about children and fathers; so too with many other midrashic transformations, whereby biblical bloodlines become lines of metaphorical, that is, spiritual or intellectual, 'kinship'.[3]

The dominant metaphor in such texts is that of the father. Yet at times the Sages also lay claim to metaphorical motherhood, as in Tosefta *Horayot* 2: 7: 'He who teaches his fellow Mishnah is considered to have conceived him, formed [*rokmo*] him, and brought him into the world.' The master of Torah lays claim to quintessentially maternal activities, evoking the physical dimension of 'knitting together' the foetus in the womb along with giving birth, in a discipleship community that systematically excluded actual women.[4] Likewise, *Song of Songs Rabbah* (on S. of S. 4: 5, 'Your breasts are like two fawns | Twins of a gazelle, browsing among the lilies') reads:

Just as these breasts are the splendour and glory of a woman, so too Moses and Aaron are the splendour and glory of Israel . . . Just as these breasts are full of milk, Moses and Aaron fill Israel with Torah. And just as with these breasts, all that a woman eats, the baby eats and nurses from them, so too all of the Torah that Moses learned he taught to Aaron. This is what is meant by 'Moses told Aaron all of the words of God'. (Exod. 4: 28)

Women's breasts, beautiful and life-sustaining, capable of a unique alchemy by which ordinary food is transmuted into nurturing milk, serve here as a metaphor for Torah and its transmission to the people of Israel. For the rabbis who produced such an image, the homosocial *beit midrash* held just such a dual capacity: pulsing with eros and sustaining culture and life in the face of exile and dispersion.[5]

Such a privileging of metaphorical fatherhood and motherhood over social or biological parenthood occurs in a wide variety of cultures and literatures. Most familiar from philosophical discourse is the figure of the man, in Plato's *Symposium*, whose soul is divine and who therefore gives birth to immortal beauty. 'Everyone', Diotima declaims, 'would prefer to have children like that rather than human ones' (Plato 2003: 209*d*). The male philosopher (or, in some later incarnations, artist) is the creator whose intellectual generativity surpasses women's merely physical generativity. As Rachel Bowlby writes of this trope of metaphorical offspring, 'what is desirable is a form of parenthood that exceeds—and thereby demotes—the physical reproduction of ordinary mortals. The creative person generates babies that are so much better than the ones that appear in everyday

life; but babies is what he (or she) generates, and a parent, intellectual rather than bodily, is what the maker is, in relation to his or her creative productions' (Bowlby 2013: 11–12). In the rabbinic context, this trope finds expression in a wide range of texts, in which, Boyarin asserts, 'the production of spiritual children, those who will follow in the moral and religious ways of the parent, is claimed . . . as more important than the production of biological children' (Boyarin 1993: 217).

As powerful as this trope is in Western thought, the rabbinic construct differs from the Platonic example in one key respect: the 'children' to which the rabbinic sage lays parental claim are not ideas but actual people; they are students of the Sages. Plato's Socrates can essentially dispense with the biological or social family: a child, after all, can never be transformed into an idea. By contrast, the rabbinic sage will constantly engage the family—the familial son will always be a potential *talmid* in the rabbinic circle. The Sages' constructions of their own communities of scholars were, by and large, only *symbolically* distinct; practically, they lived, met with each other, and conversed within normal families, spaces, and communities even as they counselled symbolic separation from familial life and the porous, vulnerable body (Baker 2002; Hezser 1997; Schofer 2010; Sivertsev 2005). Likewise, they did not posit that cultural reproduction could entirely displace biological reproduction; rather, each was to exist alongside the other, and the former would serve as the telos of the latter (Alexander 2013: 185; Schofer 2004: 83). The rabbinic sage, standing in relative proximity to the social parent, would thus necessarily compete with him for the title of 'father'.

The language of metaphorical fatherhood for the rabbinic master could thus produce only a pale rendering of actual fatherhood and barely a sketch of motherhood. In their haste to replace him with the rabbinic sage, the Sages circumvented the familial father. Rather than elevating the prestige of the father and the birth-giving mother, the construct in fact diminishes, even undermines, the familial parents.[6] The father would be judged successful only to the extent that he could replicate or mimic the sage's identity within the family. The complementary cultural construct of the rabbinic sage as father, then, is the construct of the lay paterfamilias as would-be sage, the father who will ritually teach his sons Torah so as to mimetically reproduce the Torah learning of the sage with his disciples.

Elizabeth Shanks Alexander argues that the *locus classicus* for the talmudic delineation of paternal responsibility should be read as an endeavour to make some aspects of the Sages' practice available to laymen. Tosefta *Kidushin* 1: 11 states:

> Our Rabbis taught: A father is obligated to his son [*ha'av ḥayav bivno*]: to circumcise him, to redeem him [if he is a firstborn], to teach him Torah, to find him a wife, and to teach him a craft.[7]

This Tosefta forms the basis for the amoraic discussion of a father's obligations

towards his son (BT *Kid*. 29*a*), presenting, in the order of a boy's developmental stages, the paternal tasks necessary to ensure the son's participation in and replication of the covenantal community. Alternatively, this delineation of the father's responsibility to his son centres on the cultivation of the social, intellectual, and economic skills the son would need in order for the covenantal community to replicate itself. In either case, the gender-specificity of this text cannot be erased: it concerns *fathers*, not parents, and *sons*, not children.

Alexander argues that the gender economy of this text reveals a broader vision in which the teaching of Torah in a lay context is constructed as a means for the lay paterfamilias to replicate the (male) sage and his community (Alexander 2013: 184–8). Beyond the significant consequences for women encoded in this text, the major implication of the rabbinic claim to the role of spiritual, intellectual, and cultural paternity is that social, familial fatherhood is best accomplished when it consists in the work of teaching one's own child Torah. Thus fathers have a limited visibility in these texts; they provide the raw material for a child's conception and then train their sons in the ways of Torah, the premier example of which is teaching, or inculcating, Torah itself (Margalit 2004). Any further aspect of 'fatherhood' is evacuated and replaced with a pedagogical meaning, such that to be a father is to be, ideally, a teacher of Torah. The construction of paternity as exemplified by teaching sons Torah is, thus, the complement of the claim of the sage as father. Taken together, these two constructs produce the critical homology between 'fathering' and 'teaching' that Blidstein (1975) describes as an axiological structure in rabbinic texts. Fathers are legible only as (and to the extent that they are) teachers of Torah, inculcators of children into a cultural system.

The intellectual, textual, and practical legacy of this conceptual world is as problematic for mothers as it is for fathers. The Talmud contains nothing comparable to the list of paternal obligations in BT *Kidushin* 29*a* for the mother. Even the most quintessential of the biological mother's roles—breastfeeding her child—is explicitly named as a woman's obligation to her *husband*, not to her child (Mishnah *Ket*. 5: 5; see also Baumgarten 2007: 119–54). Neither do we find a comparable normative statement on what daughters should be given or taught by parents of either gender. The system of parents and children here is a male economy of fathers and sons, in which the only truly visible *bayit* (home) is the symbolic one, that is, the *beit midrash*.

Moreover, the particular social roles and responsibilities of rabbinic culture yield, in BT *Kidushin* 29*a*, a limited sense of the specific *kind* of teaching that is visible in its construction of the halakhic obligations of fathering. Teaching here is visible only insofar as it is directly linked to and responsible for a culturally valued activity: knowledge of Torah. As Natan Margalit argues, this text 'is not interested in the day-to-day nurturing, the feeding and clothing of the child, but, rather, it is concerned with what Lawrence Hoffman has labelled the "covenantal obligations"' (Margalit 2004: 310, quoting Hoffman 1996: 80–1). Absent are

the repetitive, daily labours of childrearing, of raising a child from infancy to the point at which he can be schooled and taught Torah, married off, or trained in a trade. That is, the text of BT *Kidushin* 29*a* imagines a boy who has already been born, cared for, and sustained in the variety of material ways necessary for the culturally valued activities of Torah, marriage, and work to be eventually available to him as an adult. It does not imagine the woman or women who have gestated, fed, and cared for him—nor, of course, the daughter, who will never be formally accepted into the covenantal community.[8]

A short discussion in BT *Sukah* 28*b* exemplifies this rabbinic occlusion of maternal work precisely by gesturing briefly towards it. Mishnah *Sukah* 2: 8 speaks of 'a minor [*katan*] who does not need his mother' as being obligated in the *mitsvah* of sukkah. The discussion in the *gemara* reads as follows:

> *A minor who does not need his mother*, etc. . . . The school of R. Jannai says, One whose mother does not have to wipe him when he relieves himself. R. Simeon says: One who, when sleeping does not [awake] call[ing] his mother. But do not older children also call their mother? Rather, one who awakes from his sleep and does not call 'Mommy! Mommy!'

The charm of this text lies in its evocation, across so many hundreds of years, of the daily, familiar, and at times tedious duties of childcare. The editors of this text recognize and mention these moments, but then quickly dispense with them in order to concentrate on the halakhic issue at hand: the point at which a minor male child becomes obligated to dwell in the sukkah. Maternal activity, the daily care of young children, is assumed, but remains in the background; paternal activity is commanded, and thus enjoys a religious imprimatur—but only, as I have suggested above, to the extent that it produces a new member of the community of sages.

In this literature, and the practices to which it is linked, women are clearly *expected* to perform much of the cleaning, soothing, feeding, and other duties that comprise the bulk of childrearing. But these 'maternal' obligations, when they are visible within the rabbinic corpus at all, are—as with breastfeeding—conceived as duties to the male head of house. The line between mother and child cannot be drawn directly, for rabbinic texts cannot conceive of mothers directly participating in the economy of cultural transmission. Only men, not women, are teachers; fathers are 'fathers' only insofar as they are 'teachers'; and only the rabbinic ideal of Torah, not what Adrienne Rich called 'the small, routine chores of socializing a human being' (1986: 33), is the stuff of teaching.[9]

The limitations of the rabbinic constructs of the father as teacher and the teacher as 'father' (and 'mother') are clear: the rabbis defined fatherhood narrowly, as the ritual teaching of Torah and the discharging of covenantal duties associated with upholding the community of rabbis; and Sages engage in 'fatherly' relationships with disciples only in this metaphorical and narrow sense.

Other parental work—gestation and feeding, nose-wiping and tear-drying—is not conceptualized as religiously or culturally meaningful. The work of childrearing typically associated with female actors is absent from normative descriptions of parental responsibility, except through metaphorical appropriations. Certainly, none of the texts we have encountered could imagine the daily, repetitive work of caring for a small child as teaching at all, let alone as the teaching of Torah.

Let me now reverse the foreground and background in this discourse. What happens if, rather than seeing the father as mimicking the Sages in a discipleship relationship with his sons, we include mothers, and see *both* parents, with all the varied skills they possess, as teachers? Can we imagine the mother as the master, and what she teaches as not only Torah in the narrow sense, conceived as a discrete ritual or intellectual activity, but rather in its broadest sense, as a capacious body of knowledge that children absorb? Could this latter, expansive sense of what the maternal sage teaches be called Torah? These are the possibilities to which I now turn.

Maternal work at its most basic involves substantive social and dispositional, cultural, intellectual, and existential teaching. It is, more often than not, implicit rather than explicit, the work of modelling rather than of verbal instruction. It involves a host of skills: how to tie one's shoes or blow one's nose, interact with others, recover from disappointment, know what is worthy in life, in what ways the world can be trusted, and so on. This is not to say that an infant comes into the world a *tabula rasa*, but rather that hospitable circumstances permit its inherent capabilities to flourish. While we debate endlessly about how learning is best accomplished and what constitutes successful learning, it is clear that from the moment we are born we gain experience of the world, and our innate capacities are thereby transformed into reliable knowledge and skills. It is not only, or initially, the world at large that is our primary 'teacher'. Rather, it is a small number of other figures who accompany us on this journey—for longer or shorter periods, and with greater or lesser patience, skill, and interest in guiding us. In many cultures and for many centuries, this is what has defined mothering, the quotidian, repetitive work that mediates the world during the formative years of life: wiping bottoms and answering insistent cries in the middle of the night.

This labour is not usually thought of as 'teaching' per se. But viewing mundane childrearing tasks through this lens allows us to understand a fundamental aspect of human society and to see the vital role it plays in Jewish religious life. Describing maternal caregiving as teaching in its broadest sense requires us to acknowledge that the actors who perform these tasks are teachers, and to relinquish the intellectual habit of reducing such activities to 'maternal instinct'. Feeding an infant, to take one example, cannot be fully comprehended if it is seen merely as an evolutionarily determined, instinctual means to ensure the child's continued survival and growth. It is an activity that inextricably teaches the fact of responsive presence, and the primary experiences of hunger and satiety. This

form of instruction is not merely preparatory, to be surpassed by more 'mature' lessons, but rather forms the entire substructure of the interior world each of us inhabits thereafter (Traina 2011). It is a matter of teaching an infant how to be a human being.

The responsibility for teaching these lessons has been, for centuries, that of mothers. It begins in embodied intimacy, in a sustained attention to the physical body of the child. The language of the body is each person's first language: years before the mouth can utter words, the body speaks a more primal language, composed of tears, grunts, movements, sensitive spots, gurgles, softness, smells, warm skin, raised or drooping eyelids. As infants, we depend on being met by someone who can decode it and answer back in this language: with skin, cooing, sing-song, an open gaze. To become a teacher in this language, long forgotten or buried by the time one reaches adulthood, is also to become a learner, aware of the body's power and its precedence over all other kinds of experience of the world. The physical intimacy that is the most elemental substance of maternal teaching engenders a deep knowledge, a familiarity that is not mastery but rather the constant surprise of difference and strangeness within the familiar. Out of palpable closeness comes the possibility of recognizing the subtle but sudden change in gait or expression or shape of the face, that is, of noticing the gap between expectation and present reality.[10]

The daily fare of maternal struggle is being caught in between a deep familiarity and a deep division between child and parent. The fantasy embedded in the concept of 'reproduction'—that a child replicates the parent; that it is a 'product' identical in kind to its progenitor—does not admit the knowledge that children come into the world not as miniature versions of the parents, nor as the simple result of genetically determined factors, but as unique humans. They are neither empty slates nor an unformed mass of clay waiting to be shaped. Maternal teaching faces, gladly or not, the *otherness* of the child.

The daily duties of the mother demand a different attitude towards one's child from those put forward in rabbinic discourse, which aims for the cultivation and replication of the figure of the sage. The rabbis' appropriation of familial language adapted the authority the priesthood once enjoyed to a new social form. Boyarin argues:

> The signifier of biological filiation has a strong anchoring in the values of the culture. As such, the rabbinic mantle should have passed from father to son, as does the crown of priesthood. But it doesn't, at least not in any straightforward way. On the one hand, the Rabbis have created a sort of meritocracy to replace the religious aristocracy that the Bible ordains. Filiation is no longer from father to son but from teacher to disciple . . . But the desire that genetic replicability be homologous with pedagogical replicability persists. (Boyarin 1993: 208)

The rabbis were caught, in this account, in the tension between their 'desire on the one hand to pass on the mantle of Torah from father to son and the anxiety

that, in a profound sense, *people do not reproduce each other*' (Boyarin 1993: 208, 210–11).

Paradoxically, perhaps, the context of intimate familiarity and involvement with one's child makes clear the great extent to which 'genetic replicability' is a fantasy. As Boyarin has demonstrated, 'paternity' (biological or intellectual) serves as rabbinic shorthand for identity and replicability. But the actual work of attending to one's children constantly demands confrontation with the unexpected and unfamiliar in a creature one may have anticipated would be the familiar 'product' of the self. The task of biological parents is to surrender the fantasy that their children are extensions of themselves.[11] Thus, to the extent that the rabbinic ambition of replicability is modelled on biological paternity, it is an ambition grounded in a fantasy that the daily work of childrearing erodes. Against this paternal conception of teaching as simply transmitting or replicating what has come before, I argue that maternal teaching acknowledges a child's temperament, abilities, and disposition as unpredictable and unique.

Recognition of this otherness means a reorientation of what we understand teaching to be. Rather than conceiving of it as primarily concerned with inculcating norms or values, the maternal instruction I propose tolerates (and perhaps occasionally embraces) the difference between the (adult) self and the (young) other. Hence parents' success as teachers depends on the degree to which they recognize the impossibility and ultimate undesirability of shaping the child, or the student, in their own image. It accepts the constant erosion and reconstitution of the very self who is the teacher.[12] Adrienne Rich thus argues:

> Most of the literature of infant care and psychology has assumed that the process toward individuation is essentially the *child's* drama, played out against and with a parent or parents who are, for better or worse, givens. Nothing could have prepared me for the realization that I was a mother, one of those givens, *when I knew I was still in a state of uncreation myself*. (Rich 1986: 17; emphasis added)

Paradoxically, it is precisely the parent's openness to being taught by the work of parenting that renders childrearing perhaps the most intimate form of instruction.

A practice in which teaching does not demand detachment from but rather embrace of the body; in which the pupil retains her otherness and does not need to become a replica of the instructor; in which the teacher herself is destabilized and reconstituted—can this be thought of as 'Torah'? In this final section, I use a hermeneutics of retrieval to suggest how some of these possibilities can be wrested from an androcentric tradition. I do not claim to recover a forgotten or suppressed consciousness of Jewish women's experience from centuries past; the scarcity of women's writings and the participation of those writings that do exist in the structures of androcentric Judaism (Tiktiner 2008; Weissler 1998) would necessarily render such a claim untenable. Rather, I wish to unearth from patriarchal frameworks a trope present in biblical and midrashic sources that

imagines childrearing as both maternal work *and* as Torah (Jacobowitz 2010). The most expansive notion of teaching, according to these sources, begins by attending to the basic physical needs of a dependent child.

In contrast to the powerful rhetoric in the books of the prophets (especially Deutero- or Trito-Isaiah), according to which God is depicted as Mother Zion—carrying, labouring, birthing, nursing, dandling, and comforting her child Israel—pentateuchal passages do not explicitly name or imagine God in maternal terms (on maternal divine imagery, see Brettler 1998: 115–18; Gruber 1992). Yet, as Ilana Pardes has documented, in God's bringing the people of Israel out of Egypt, feeding them, and giving them instruction (Torah), we find a complex and rich relationship drawn in 'maternal' terms (Pardes 2000). The pentateuchal narrative, Pardes argues, yields a nuanced portrait of maternal teaching. Against the narrow strand of rabbinic thought in which parenthood can be mobilized only within the rabbinic circle of masters and disciples, this reading suggests an alternative set of images of a God who feeds and cares for the people of Israel in material ways and on a daily basis, not distinguishing sons from daughters. These sources offer the possibility of claiming maternal work as the very essence of Torah.

As Pardes has shown, birth is a powerful metaphor for the generation of nations, including the biblical nation of Israel, from the narrative of its passage from slavery in Egypt through the desert to Sinai and beyond (Pardes 2000: 16). The narrative of Exodus suggests the process of childbirth: the plagues, coming wave upon wave, with momentary reprieve between each one, recall labour contractions; the passage through the 'narrow [*tsa'ar*] straits' of Egypt and the Sea of Reeds evoke the breaking of the waters and the journey through the birth canal (Pardes 2000: 28). If these allusions are not clear from the pentateuchal text itself, the Prophets and later midrashic literature make the parallel explicit, depicting God alternately as midwife or as nursing mother. We see such readings in Ezekiel's narrative of the care of the bloody newborn (Ezek. 16) and in the midrashic comment on Deuteronomy 4: 34 ('Has God ever ventured to go and take himself one nation from the midst of [*mikerev*] another?'): 'What is the force of one nation from the midst of [from the innards [*kerev*] of] another nation? Like a person who extracts a foetus from the bowels of the mother animal, God brought Israel out of Egypt' (*Yalkut shimoni* 5: 91–2 (*piskah* 828)).[13]

But childbirth is merely the first episode in the long process of childrearing. Beyond the narratives of redemption in terms of childbirth, the more important texts for our purposes are those that continue the metaphor, seeing in the stories of Israel in the desert the sometimes tedious and burdensome, sometimes delightful, work of childrearing. I focus here on but one aspect of this care: the manna with which God fed Israel, which one midrashic tradition likens to mother's milk (others compare it to water and bread: see Marcus 1996; Rosenblum 2010: 58–63; Vermes 1975).

Manna is the first food the Israelites consume after their birth, as it were, as a nation. No wonder the *midrash* likens it to the mother's 'milk', as in BT *Yoma* 75*a*:

> 'And the taste of it was the taste of a cake [*leshad*] baked with oil' (Num. 11: 8). Rabbi Abbahu said: 'Read not cake [*leshad*], but breast [*shad*].' Hence, just as an infant, whenever he touches the breast, finds many flavours in it, so it was with manna. Whenever Israel ate it, they found many flavours in it.

A later (eleventh-century) tradition, building on the same wordplay between *leshad* (cake) and *shad* (breast), reads this form of nourishment as the paradigm for all other food:

> Just as the breast [*shad*] in which the baby tastes all sweet things, so too was the manna to Israel. Just as the breast gives the primary food for the baby, and all other food is secondary, so too the manna was primary and all other food was secondary. (*Pesikta zutarta* on Num. 'Beha'alotekha')

Returning to Exodus itself with this image in mind, we see that manna offers Israel its first experience of divine instruction: 'And the Lord said to Moses: "I will rain down bread for you from the sky; and the people shall go out and gather each day that day's portion—that I may test them, to see whether they will follow My Torah or not"' (Exod. 16: 4). The 'Torah' (*torati*) referred to here—not to gather more, nor to go out on the sabbath—is a gateway into 'Torah' in its more general sense, as divine teaching: the manna, like milk, is the 'children's' first taste of God's Torah. Midrashic teaching extends this point to a more radical reading of the manna not as the *introduction* to Torah, but *as* Torah, which the people of Israel take into their bodies (see *Mekhilta derabi yishma'el* on Exod. 13: 17–18 in Vermes 1975: 142; Rosenblum 2010: 58–63). Where the rabbinic tradition mobilizes the mother's milk as a symbol for Torah but then displaces the mother–child relationship in favour of the male enterprise of Torah study (Marcus 1996: 85–6, 91), I suggest the retrieval of the mother's milk as Torah, and of the maternal figure as its primary transmitter.

The Pentateuch's portrayal of maternal care, when associated with God and Moses, is not only located in demonstrations of generosity and caregiving, but also in the uniquely challenging work of being the primary teacher of one's own child. Thus the feeding that transmits Torah as 'mother's milk' is simultaneously a site of frustration and exasperation, as the infant Israel longs to return from the wilderness to the apparent security of Egypt and transgresses the Torah: 'And God said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to obey My commandments and My teachings?"' (Exod. 16: 28). In Numbers 11, as Pardes (2000: 51) notes, the 'children's' resistance to the manna triggers God's anger: God grants Israel food as punishment rather than nurture; the plague that follows leads to death. As indicated in this passage, an honest portrayal of the trials of maternal feeding as teaching suggests that rage and frustration should be understood as continuous with, and not only as a contradiction to, giving and nurture.[14]

In these biblical texts and their midrashic elaborations, Torah is embedded in the prosaic work of feeding and carrying one's child. The child Israel cannot and does not become a copy of the mother, but rather is imagined as insisting on its difference from her, a difference that makes relationship, and thus covenant, possible. Torah here concerns not only intellectual learning, but the ceaseless work of mediating the world—and indeed being the world—for the child or children in one's care. It is this form of instruction that is portrayed as the most basic meaning of Torah itself, and it is God who instructs the children of Israel. In this reading, God too is in a state of 'uncreation', still in the process of learning and becoming.

I return from the divine to the human realm. I have argued that we may understand Torah teaching, at its root, to consist in the embodied, quotidian work that parents perform for their young children. It is repetitive, tiresome, and often exasperating. It is also the primary means of communicating with and showing devotion to human beings. I have located a model for this work in God's care for Israel in order to suggest one resource for the contemporary feminist project of recognizing and revaluing the work of mothers within Jewish traditions.

But this route is not the only means at our disposal for recognizing maternal work as Torah. Let me return once more to the figure of the sage and quote at length from Jaffee's account of the process by which Written Torah was to be transformed, ultimately, not only into 'Torah in the mouth' but, even more, into the 'embodiment of the text in the form of a human act':

> In truth, Oral Torah was never merely a collection of words on or off a page. In the discipleship-communities of the Sages Oral Torah was a form of tradition that overcame anything written or spoken. Grounded in speech, it nevertheless absorbed all discourse into something even more concrete. This, as I have explained, was nothing less than the living presence of the Master, whose very bodily motions were read as wordless texts disclosing the essence of Torah. The Sage, then, the person of the living Master, is our last crucial text of Torah. And the code he embodied could be read only by one devoted to his personal service. (Jaffee 1997: 542)

The ultimate test of the success for all Torah, in this account, lies in its ability to become embodied in a human being, and in the possibility of a disciple 'reading' the text that his master embodies.[15]

To once again draw on, but then invert, the rabbinic discourse of the sage: imagine that parents' bodies, actions, and movements are the Torah that their children absorb.[16] The parent—engaged in ordinary, quotidian duties of care and responsibility, whom we can speak of historically, but not normatively, as 'the mother'—then becomes the sage, the 'living scroll' whose embodied Torah is precisely what the child learns to 'read'. This parental teaching is not, as in the historical model of the sage, to be superseded by the teaching of the sage, but is rather the teaching itself, and simultaneously the foundation upon which all later learning builds.

To hold up the parent as the sage who embodies Torah is to suggest that the practice of ritual and intellectual Torah study is derivative. The more basic and embodied practice of attention, care, and openness to the other to which all ritualized Torah study points is available, not exclusively but perhaps most obviously, in the kind of care that mothers undertake for their children. Thus to truly absorb Torah in its fullest sense cannot be accomplished solely by the type of learning that has been valorized for generations in Jewish life. It requires the care that Jewish tradition has failed to recognize as the daily work of those who respond, in the wee hours of the night, to a child calling, 'Mommy! Mommy!'

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Notes

1 See the American Time Use Survey, published yearly by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (<http://www.bls.gov/tus/>). Regarding men's involvement in daily care and responsibility for young children, see Laughlin 2010. Note that the Bureau decided to count the time that fathers (but not mothers) spent with their children as time children were in 'childcare', i.e. as indistinguishable from time spent in daycare outside the home. See <http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/08/the-census-bureau-counts-fathers-as-childcare/>.

2 See discussion in Blidstein 1975: 138. Translations from rabbinic works are my own. Biblical translations are adapted from JPS 1917.

3 There are many halakhic implications of such an equation or substitution; for example, Mishnah *BM* 2: 11 (BT *BM* 33*a*) asserts that one should give priority to one's teacher over one's father (see Blidstein 1975: 141–3). When a father is not a learned man, he is expected to arrange for a man who *is* learned in Torah to teach his son as a proxy; in this case, the teacher acquires a stature that is analogous to that of the father (BT *Kid.* 30*a*).

4 Women, of course, appear as speakers in anecdotes in talmudic literature, but scholars debate the extent to which we can imagine the women portrayed to correlate with actual women's voices. Within the voluminous literature on this topic, see especially Fonrobert 2000 and Hauptman 2010.

5 For a comparative and theoretical perspective on men's appropriations of maternal imagery in a religious context, see Bynum 1984 and 1987.

6 Fraade briefly notes the possible negative implication of this ideological structure for the biological father (1991: 257).

7 In the Babylonian Talmud, the discussion of this passage is framed by a discussion on the gendered nature and requirements of various *mitsvot*. Women's exemption from all time-bound positive *mitsvot* is deduced from their exemption from wearing *tefilin*. For a few of the many treatments of the relationship between women's exemption from time-bound *mitsvot* and the exclusion of girls from *talmud torah*, see Alexander 2013; Hauptman 1998; Margalit 2004.

8 On the issue of women in the 'covenantal community', see Cohen 2005.

9 The *gemara* recognizes a commandment (*mitsvah*) incumbent upon the father of educating/training (*ḥinukh*) a son in *mitsvot*. *Ḥinukh* does not refer to 'socialization' per se but rather specific ritual acts construed as 'positive commandments', such as fasting on Yom Kippur (BT *Yoma* 82*a*) or blowing the *shofar* (BT *RH* 32*b*–33*a*). BT *Naz*. 28*b*–29*a* establishes that a father is obligated to train his son, but not his daughter, and that a mother is not obligated to train her son (nor, we may infer, her daughter).

10 Note that the discourse of replicability and sameness often, in androcentric texts, remains focused on physical resemblance: does the child 'look like' his or her father to the paternal or non-parental observer? Such a focus befits a patriarchal anxiety about the adequate control of women's sexuality. For discussions of this issue with regard to rabbinic literature and in comparative religious perspective, see Kessler 2009 and Kueny 2014.

11 Andrew Solomon's *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity* (2012) reveals how challenging such a task can be for the biological parents of children whose social identities land more obviously far from the parental 'tree'. However, his rich investigation yields the understanding that the work of recognizing a child's difference is one of the core tasks of parenthood.

12 Griffin 1992 reflects beautifully on the capacity for such a 'maternal' mode of instruction to be defined as 'true teaching'.

13 See also the discussion of this metaphor in Zornberg 2001: 84–5.

14 Although my reading differs from that of Pardes in referring to this explosive anger as maternal rather than paternal rage, her overall gloss on this verse and its difference from its retelling in Deuteronomy is astute (cf. Pardes 2000: 55).

15 Daniel Boyarin (1993: 122 ff.) and others (more recently, Simon-Shoshan 2013) have investigated this type of 'imitative' learning, exemplified most famously in the story (BT *Ber*. 62*a* and elsewhere) of Rabbi Kahana lying under Rav's bed, listening to his teacher and his teacher's wife having sex, and justifying his impertinence by exclaiming 'It is Torah, and I must learn it.' Simon-Shoshan considers the potential problems of what he calls the 'rabbinic exemplum', the embodied sage whose exemplary acts are understood to 'bridge the gap between lived experience and legal principles by bringing the exemplar's actual living deeds into the legal discourse' (2013: 464).

16 I am grateful to Liz Shanks Alexander for suggesting the use of Jaffee's insight in this way.

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