

Ritual and Childcare, Time and Place:
a Feminist abuts the *Mitzvot aseh shehazman grama*

“Women, slaves and minors are exempt from the recitation of *Shema* and from phylacteries, but are obligated in prayer, *mezuzah* and Grace after meals” (Mishnah Berakhot 3:3).

I resented this passage from the Mishnah as a young feminist. It was a key text used to exclude me from the rituals I wished to describe in detail as an ethnographer since, in an Orthodox service at least, I couldn't be counted in a *minyan* (prayer quorum) or chant from the Torah scroll. The *Mitzvot aseh shehazman grama* (positive time-bound commandments) enumerated by the rabbis as required of men but not of women, and therefore for which women could not fulfil a man's obligation, were the key to women's contributions in the synagogue not being counted in a substantive ritual way. Over several decades of adulthood, a Jewish feminist's relationship with this conceptual framing of *halacha* (Jewish law) might evolve, and new interpretations might be tied to the domestic responsibilities that inspired their framing.

Phase 1: Denial

As a college student majoring in Talmud and focusing on feminist readings of ancient texts, I was periodically invited to speak to religious campus groups about what the Mishnah had to say about the debates over egalitarianism that animated campus religious life in the 1990s and early 2000s. Having worked with some top-drawer second-wave feminists, I was prepared to answer that the exclusion of women from being counted in a *minyan* was obsolete in the case of women who took on the responsibility (*khiyuv*) of prayer and its accoutrements. The best literature interpreted that framework as an anachronism, made obsolete by the entry of women into the workforce as equal economic partners to their husbands who themselves now engage in child-rearing activities (to say nothing of gender non-conforming families, about whom the literature had little to say in the 90s). Exemption, as the argument went, is not the same as prohibition, and scholars through the ages – most notably Rashi – had proposed viable workarounds to give willing women access to ritual responsibility. These talks were usually well-received, in part because they were chock full of Talmudic references, and pushback usually came from individuals who argued that *halacha* is non-negotiable. As I remember the audiences from those talks, I recall a lot of young people, and certainly not any parents, who I only now know do not have time to attend talks as a leisure activity. My education in text and *halacha* was part of a professional development that was untethered to any domestic responsibilities, and that shaped my interpretation of those texts.

Phase 2: Bargaining

In 2019, I was launching a new project after my first book was published, and I was interviewing all the rabbis I could about Sephardic Torah chanting. On one occasion, it was impossible to secure childcare, and I brought my 10-month-old baby Leah with me. “I'm a professional. My book won a prize. I can still do my work during school breaks,” was my internal reasoning when I refused to re-schedule the interview. Who knew if a re-scheduled meeting would ever happen; it had to go forward. Leah behaved absolutely as well as a baby can be expected to behave under these conditions, and the interview had so much good material that it made it into an article within months. About a year later, I was finalizing the article and I listened to the recording with great attention. About forty minutes in, my

interviewee conveyed a piece of information that I had not heard the first time because I was silencing a wriggling baby. But what he was describing was a ritual that I described in detail in the article and had gone to some length to lament wasn't brought up in my interviews. Equal parts crushed and exhilarated, I wondered how much more was out there – extremely valuable information that I missed because I hadn't heard it the first time, or because I was otherwise engaged in childcare. “If I juggle everything expertly, then my research need not suffer” might have been a workable mantra pre-pandemic, but such a mantra demands that the tasks of motherhood be delayed (*lo hazman grama*, as the rabbis put it).

Phase 3: Despair (Acceptance)

Summer 2023. I am very busy at work, and I struggle to manage exams, conferences and writing alongside school pick-up. My (male) PhD student approaches me with the proposal that he spend Yom Tov at my field site, but he is met with an auto-reply along the lines of “As a general guideline, I can take on any additional responsibilities that do not require my being at a certain place at a certain time.” I am happy to offer advice because he has a great attitude, and I send him a list of the best synagogues to go to. He sets his expectations low; after all, he hasn't studied any of the three research languages that facilitated my work there. Yet he returns from his two-week trip with more interviews secured than I had accumulated in the project's four years, in part because sitting behind the *mechitzah* (ritual barrier) gave me less access to interviewees (also partly because I often had to leave early to relieve a babysitter). In moments of professional despair, when I wonder if I will ever again be able to complete a task to my own satisfaction, I try to reassure myself that the rabbis ordered us not to take on too many additional responsibilities while our children were small.

Jewish millennial mothers and scholars come of age with the concept of the “second shift” already well-theorized – work is followed by domestic duties...and more work – but the concept of the *Mitzvot aseh shehazman grama* problematizes these responsibilities ritually. Ordered ritually to rest, the Jewish mother spends Shabbat washing dishes; asked not to take on too many extra responsibilities, the Jewish mother is banned from spaces of spiritual fulfillment. This category of *mitzvot* (commandments) establishes for Jewish mothers a hierarchy of labor and access that continues to both support and disadvantage them in modern life, perhaps even more than in the world of its original framing.