

Hagar Spoke to God
A Sermon for Rosh HaShanah 5766
Rabbi Ellen Lippmann

Last year at this time I told you about buying a refrigerator at Drimmer's. This year, it's the vacuum cleaner. We had a good vacuum cleaner for years, but it finally started to wear out and Carol, the woman who cleans our house, said, "You have to buy me a new vacuum cleaner." So I went to Lowe's, talked to the vacuum cleaner guy, and picked one that seemed really good and likely to last for years. It is sort of an upright and with a hose – a great combination. Carol hates it. She never says so; I can just tell. So why did I buy a vacuum cleaner whose main user hates it? Why didn't I ask her what kind of vacuum cleaner she prefers? Or ask her to come shopping with me? I have to admit, in this season of admissions, that I just didn't think. I needed a new vacuum cleaner, I shopped when it was convenient for me, I picked by price and the word of the in-store expert, and I never thought "How will this be for Carol to use?"

I want to talk tonight about thinking and about the people who work in our homes: the maids, nannies and health care aides who make so many of our lives possible and thus hold our homes together. Thinking about them and about us and our homes raises all the large issues of race and class that we have focused on since the recent hurricanes, but through the small intimate lens of home. We have to think about feminism and what is still called women's work and the price of housing and fair wages and immigration. And most important, we have to think about our homes and how our values – our passion for justice, our work for fairness in many large realms – work in our homes. All this because of buying a vacuum cleaner.

Now I am aware as I speak that not everyone here hires someone to work in your home. You may not see it as priority or you'd love to but can't afford it or you do it only rarely – cleaning for a special occasion, say. Or maybe you tried it and didn't like it – you want to stay home with your kids, if you're lucky enough to choose to do so, or you think you do a better job of cleaning, or you don't want to live with the questioning and guilt that often accompany this kind of hiring or you object, on principle, to the idea of someone cleaning up after you or acting as a servant. So I recognize that this is not a situation in every one of your homes. But it is a major story in many, many homes in this city and across the country and as such, we all need to be interested. For me, it is a fascination as well as a lived reality: What does it mean to bring another woman – almost always another woman – into your home? What does it say about race and class in America that most domestic workers are not white and most of us employers are or that we who think of ourselves as middle class are able to afford to pay others to do work in our homes? What would we do without these workers? What can we do with them?

I confess that I have been ambivalent about how to speak about this with you. Part of me remembers a line reportedly spoken by Reinhold Niebuhr, "the purpose of religion is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable". Surely most of us sitting here tonight are the comfortable and we may need to confront some uncomfortable truths. But part of me also knows that the people of Kolot Chayeinu are good, honorable people who hire domestic workers the way you do so much else – with clarity of purpose and respect. Maybe you are already doing the things I will suggest here. So which is it? I have wondered. Do I speak to you as if afflicting the comfortable, or do I ask you to help me from your place of greater wisdom and experience? Both are probably true and you may here some of both in what follows. I ask you to try to listen with open ears and open hearts, taking in what makes you uncomfortable and nodding in recognition at what you already know.

Let me start with a story: It begins with a couple, a man and a woman in this case, who realize they just can't do everything they want to do and also take care of everything at home. So they do what so many of us do – they bring in another woman who, they hope, will do what they are unable to do. But what they don't do is think. They hire a woman from a different culture than theirs, with different language and different expectations, and they don't think about what it will mean to bring her into their home, their lives. They forget that she will have desires of her own, her own expectations and pride and worries. And so what happens is not what they expected: The woman they hire is haughty with them, not easy-going and compliant as they had imagined. And to their surprise, they each respond to her differently, the man finding her delightful, the woman jealous, unsure, sorry she ever thought to bring in someone – another woman! – into her home. Finally, things get really bad and the woman fires the other, sends her packing in fact, though the man surreptitiously gives her some provisions for the road and some help for her future. They don't hire anyone to replace her, but the suspicions and fears that were raised in their minds while she was there stay with them, and nothing is ever the same.

The woman is Sarah, the man is Abraham, and the woman they hire is Hagar, almost always referred to as Hagar the Egyptian, a stranger who comes to dwell with them, a shifkha, a maidservant. And the work they need her to do is, of course, to produce a child when Sarah is unable to do so. Sarah is akara, not able to have children [Genesis 11:30], but akara can also mean rootless, detached, removed. Or maybe there is something wrong with her ikar – her essence. And Abraham cries out to God, “What can you possibly give me, seeing that I shall die childless?” [Genesis 15:2] He is ariri, childless, but also ariri, stirred up, protesting. They are not happy and into this time of unhappiness comes Hagar the Egyptian, the mitzrit – the one from that narrow place. Sarah says, “Maybe I will be built up through her,” or maybe she says, “I will have a child through her,” and Rashi tells us that she is bringing her tzarah into the house – tzarah being an associate wife, but tzarah also meaning trouble – tzuris. And tzuris is what she gets. Bible translator and commentator Robert Alter calls this the first domestic squabble, though squabble is a small word for the large emotions that can get stirred up.

You know what happens. Hagar lords it over Sarah when she is able to conceive quickly as Sarah never could, and Sarah reacts by treating her so harshly that Hagar runs away. The Ramban – Nachmanides – says Sarah sinned when she did this and so did Abraham by letting it happen. Abraham had said to Sarah, “Look, your maid is in your hands; do with her as you think right.” Hinei, shiftekh b'yadekh; asi lah ha-tov b'eineikh. We could atone for their sin by reading this instead as a prescription for all domestic hiring to come: Look, your maid is in your hands; do the good that is in your eyes. In other words, do what you know to be the good, the right, rather than reacting on the basis of conflicted emotion alone.

Doing what is good and right takes a lot of work, psychologically, financially, intentionally. Doing what is good and right means first, seeing that you are hiring a human being, a person with all the complexities of any human being. For us Jews, that means remembering that every human being is created in the image of God, with God's breath within them. In the context of our story, it means remembering that Hagar spoke to God. When she ran away and again when she was thrown out, God spoke to Hagar in a way she could hear and she spoke back, understanding God as El Roi – the God who sees me. When we get ready to hire someone to work in our homes, we must see that person as fully human, seen by God.

And let's do the same for ourselves. Nachman of Bratslav tells us that when thinking about teshuva, we should give everyone the benefit of the doubt, including especially ourselves. So let us remember that we work hard, all of us sitting here tonight. We work long hours and it is hard if not impossible to work, spend time with our children if we have them, or our pets or our friends or relatives, do the extra voluntary things we all try to do – including Kolot's activities – and still be able to clean our houses and care for our children or our aging parents without hiring someone to do some of it for us. So this is not about beating ourselves up, it is about trying to do the hiring thoughtfully, in both senses of the word.

First, being thoughtful about hiring means taking a look at Jewish tradition, which presents us with a clear the need for fairness in hiring: Fair though not extravagant wages, reasonable hours, provision of food, and honoring a contract. This requires us to remember that when we hire someone, even – or especially? – to work in our homes, we are becoming employers. We are not taking in a new member of the family, though sometimes it can come to seem like that to us and sometimes it seems like it to the other person as well.

My mother went back to work when I was about 12 and she hired a woman to clean our house. When I was about 15, something happened between my mother and that woman. I don't remember what, but the woman disappeared from our lives completely. My mother tried for weeks to reach her by phone and then by mail, to no avail. How bereft my mother was, weeping at the sorrow of this loss. She had thought there was love between them, when in fact the other woman saw this as a job, no more. Last week I heard an opposite story, about a woman who left her long-time position after some kind of problem arose and waited for weeks for the employer to call her, to no avail.

I worked as a maid for a family in a wealthy suburb right after I graduated from college. They had both a three year-old and a white kitchen floor, and they had tzuris in the house long before I got there, some of which was inflicted on me in the form of harsh treatment and little praise, even for washing that white floor twice daily. But I knew I was not in it for the long haul, that I had gotten a degree and could venture into the wider world of work after doing this as transition. It was a job, no more. But when I worked as a chambermaid in a motel, the other maids were in it for the long haul. I tried to think about that, making those beds and cleaning those kitchenettes day after day, week after week, year after year, I tried to imagine that. As lovely as it was to sit with them all in one of the rooms at 1 pm and watch then then-new All My Children on that room's TV--I could not,

This job thing also gets complicated because the work involved is what we have long called "women's work" – cleaning, cooking, laundry, taking care of children or parents. And we are hiring another woman to do what we women aren't able to. We feel guilty as though we should be able to do it all, and we worry that our children will love her more, and occasionally we fear that our mate will find her more attractive, and here she is living or spending many hours in our house. I wondered if men worry about all this until Brad Lander bravely told us at Open Tent that he feels guilty that the person who works for them and whom they try to pay well still cannot afford to be a tenant in their home, should she want to.

How about the person – almost always a woman – being hired? She may be worried about her immigration status, as so many of those who do domestic work are recent immigrants. She may be thinking about her own children, as often women leave their children in less-than-perfect child care to come to tend ours, or to clean our houses. She may be resentful of having to do this work or envious of our comparatively luxurious homes. If she cares for our elderly parent, she may hate doing the bodily cleaning that is necessary, or complain that she is not a nurse yet is expected to

know what she does not know, or tire of our parent's complaints. Most often, she is just trying to make enough money to live and pay her bills, and perhaps have some left over to send to relatives in the old country. Isn't it amazing, therefore, to find so many domestic workers who show great affection for our aged parent or our children; they are able to see into the heart of the matter and accept the rest for what it is. Yet while we are probably pretty careful about what we pay and the work we expect, domestic workers elsewhere are often badly mistreated, paid slave wages, kept long hours, never given a break.

Let me say a word here about race. Usually the woman we hire is a different race than ours: African-American, African-Caribbean, Asian. How often when we who are white see a Black or Hispanic woman wheeling a white child in a stroller do we think, "That's the nanny," whereas when we see a white woman wheeling a Black or Hispanic or Asian child, we think, "That's the adoptive mother." Either of those statements may be incorrect, but the fact that they arise so quickly highlights our assumptions about race. Somehow, in spite of our best intentions, I fear we are teaching many of our children that Black and Hispanic women are our servants. Why is an "au pair" often a young white person, whereas a "nanny" is so often Black or Hispanic or Asian?. And while we don't use the same overtly racist language our parents may have when they spoke about the "schwartzes", we are sometimes helping to create a dichotomy of race and class that we probably thought we would help to bridge. I am not always sure how to build the bridges but it is clear that we have to fight our assumptions as we fight for people of any race to be treated fairly when doing domestic work.

Fortunately, some domestic workers have begun to organize, in New York City forming Domestic Workers United in the 2000 to fight for better pay and conditions. In 2003, they had a victory: the mayor signed Intro #96 and Resolution #135 compelling agencies to take crucial measures to ensure the protection of workers' rights. It only covers workers who work through an agency, however, and we are often hiring workers on their own. But other help has arisen as well. Domestic Workers United and others are suggesting a contract that we can show you copies of, and urging employer and worker to enter into a fair contractual relationship. DWU estimates that there are more than 600,000 women working as nannies, companions to the elderly, and housekeepers in the greater New York metropolitan area, many of them immigrants from various countries in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America.

In last Thursday's New York Times, Rick Marin wrote a review of a book called Laundry, by Cheryl Mendelson, a former Columbia professor of academic philosophy. In the review, Marin wrote, "For New York's laundry liberals, a variation on the limousine liberal, Latin America exists to lament right-wing regimes and to supply housekeepers. They haven't ironed a shirt since Iran-contra. And they can't imagine why anyone of their class would want to."

When I read "laundry liberal" and know that Rick Marin is talking about the upper West Side, where Professor Mendelson lives, I fear that he is talking about Jews, though the issue of hiring help in one's home applies to all who can afford to do this and should, I am urging, do it right. Since we are Jews sitting here together on a night designated for thinking about doing right, it seems crucial that we Jews be thoughtful about and to the people who work in our homes. Being thoughtful means more than thinking, more than remembering we are employers and must act accordingly. I know that so many of you sitting here do act thoughtfully, do try to do what is right. Yet so many people don't that it is possible some of us don't either, not out of malice but out of busy-ness and lack of thought. I was the one who bought the hated vacuum cleaner, remember?

So let's remind ourselves that thoughtfulness also means being a kind employer, one who treats our employee with thoughtfulness. It means sticking to the hours we have set, even when we could use just one more hour to finish that project at work or get to the gym. It means allowing for sick days or family leave; our domestic workers too have children and parents and need to be able to spend time with them when necessary. It means being sure there is Shabbat built into the contract: From biblical days forward, everyone in a household, including servants, is supposed to rest on Shabbat, so let's be sure our full time workers have a day or two of rest. If those workers live in our homes, let's be sure they have a nice, private space in which to live, free from our children's or our own prying eyes. And let's try to be thoughtful about our employee's benefits, including health insurance.

Thoughtfulness may also mean creating a good, respectful way to end the working relationship. How do we fire someone respectfully, as we would if doing it at our jobs? Do we give severance pay of any kind? And what of the worker who has been with us for many years?. We have all seen on the Kolot member announcements the pleas for someone to hire the most wonderful nanny. I hope people are finding jobs that way. And how do we mark the end? With a party and a small gift, as from a regular job? With a good reference letter? With any kind of retirement benefits, if the worker has reached retirement age? "Don't cast me aside when I am old," says our Yom Kippur liturgy. Let's pay it heed.

We don't have to figure all this out ourselves. As I said, there are resources available to help, and we have provided some in your mahzors tonight. I have been helped a great deal in my thinking by the combined understanding of JFREJ and Domestic Workers United, and give special thanks to Temim Fruchter, Kolot member and JFREJ organizer. I urge you to contact them to get help We will be having a discussion about all this during Sukkot, on October 23; during Sukkot because it reminds us of how fragile our homes can be. I hope many of you will come to keep talking. And later in the winter we at Kolot will be engaging in a series of one-on-one conversations, sikhhot in Hebrew, about the things that concern and engage us most. I hope we will talk about homes as well as the larger world, domestic workers as well as other issues of justice.

We need help. That is why we may hire someone to work in our home in the first place, not to help them, though it often can, but to help ourselves. To keep our homes working, standing, we bring in another woman to do what we cannot do. A shifkha – a maid servant. Shifkha was also the ancient word for female slave, and for some the line between slavery and employment is pretty thin. Appalling as we find it, there are employers who essentially enslave their workers, giving no rest, no time away, no living wage. The Rambam, Maimonides, taught that one who holds back the wages of a worker is as though taking that worker's soul.

We need help. I want to suggest some ways we can think differently about these questions and perhaps come to some better solutions. For it is not just our individual homes that need another adult to help with the work. Our collective house – our society – is also faltering on the altar of the individual family. Somehow one nuclear family or one person is supposed to be able to do what an entire extended family or community used to do. We are supposed to take care of our children and our parents ourselves, we are supposed to earn a living ourselves, we are supposed to cook and clean and do the laundry and make the school cupcakes all ourselves. Why?

When I was a small child, my parents belonged to a baby-sitting cooperative. Do they still exist? They should. Why hasn't co-housing spread as a way to share common relaxing and dining and laundry space while still maintaining private living quarters? Why aren't we learning lessons from

the kibbutzim, like some variation on the children's houses, even while the kibbutz communal life shrinks? In our house, we talk about joining with friends to create our own assisted living facility down the road, sharing costs for a health aide who could live with us as well, each in our own apartments, but with some shared space and many shared costs.

. That is what co-op living might mean, beyond fighting over the costs of a new roof, which are of course also important.

When Abraham complained to God that he would die childless, Genesis Rabbah suggests that Sarah rebuked him for thinking only of himself. We don't want to be guilty of the same thing. We somehow have to begin to think of ways to see beyond ourselves and our own narrow needs, to change our society a bit as we help ourselves.

I am amazed that in a neighborhood like Park Slope, where there is a major food co-op to which so many Kolot members belong, and some co-op nursery schools, that there hasn't been more of a move toward co-operative child care in general, co-operative hiring of housecleaners, and even more cooperative living. Wouldn't it be amazing if we could help organize a cooperative of housecleaners or nannies?

Kolot member Mary Ann Wilner used to work for just such a cooperative, Cooperative Home Care Associates, a home health care agency in the South Bronx, begun in 1985. Mary Ann tells me that the premise was that workers would do better for themselves and the company if they were invested in the company, and that salary and benefits could be better than normal in their industry. There are now close to 1000 workers in the company in the South Bronx, many of them new immigrants - many from Central America, but some from Africa, too as well as African-Americans. In an industry that suffers from extreme turnover rates, CHCA has very high retention. It also offers benefits and training that are very unusual in an industry where workers are often seen as expendable. Basically the mission has been: By valuing workers and giving them a good job, workers will in turn take pride in their work and deliver high quality care to frail and disabled consumers.

My friend Rabbi Sarah Reines reminds me that we have to think about domestic work as honorable work. Let's begin to turn things around, to take a new view that may totally change our perspective. Rabbi Valerie Lieber suggests that we see domestic workers the way we see our lawyer or our accountant, as someone we hire to do necessary tasks for us that we can't do ourselves and that require special skills. We would then be, not employers, but clients, the ones contracting with the specialist for the work to be done. We do it with painters and builders who literally help our houses hold up, so why not with the people who metaphorically hold them up day in and day out?

As a beginning here, I know some of you who hire the same nanny or housecleaner have decided to share the cost for her health insurance or other benefits. To take that step, we have to be willing to talk about our money, one of the hardest things for us to do. Are we willing to do that? The Hebrew word "k'saf" or "k'sif" means to be frightened or ashamed. The word "kesef" - same root - means money. Let's not let money make us frightened or ashamed; let's have it work for us, instead of the other way around.

I made a little discovery while studying about this issue in Jewish sources. As I said, shifkha is the word for female servant, or maid servant, or handmaid. If you place a "mem" at the beginning of the word, you get the word "mishp'kha," family. Hebrew linguist Dr. Joel Hoffman says he

doesn't know of any other words with that root. Just shifkha and mishp'kha, the maid and the family. Without that shifkha in our midst, our families would be much diminished. And without the "mem" – the mamon (money) and the midot - -qualities – of thoughtfulness, intention, and care, the shifkha in our midst would be much worse off. It is our task to continue to remember that "mem" everytime we encounter a shifkha, so that our mishp'khot – our households, our families -- will stay strong and vital and just.

In conclusion, I want to tell you about a sign I saw years ago in Israel at a bus stop. It gave thanks to the bus driver for doing this important and necessary work. We ought to have such a sign in front of each of our houses where a nanny or housecleaner or elderly companion is working. Thank you, dear domestic worker, for doing this important and necessary work.