

Rabbi Noah Arnow  
Kol Rinah  
Parashat Chukat  
July 13, 2019 / 10 Tamuz 5779

## “You Thought There Was a Well?!”

How many of us have thought about the division of labor in our households at some point? All of us, whether when we were children, had roommates, or while living with a partner, spouse, and/or children. And we’ve all, thought, at some point, at the way gender affects the division of household labor.

How many of us have heard the phrase, “emotional labor?” “Emotional labor” was coined in 1983 by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in her book, *The Managed Heart*. The parade example of emotional labor as she described it was flight attendants, who have to be “nicer than natural,” where the work for you they are being “paid involves trying to feel the right feelings for the job.” (See <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/11/arlie-hochschild-housework-isnt-emotional-labor/576637/> for a fuller description.)

Emotional labor, however, has taken on a different meaning in the last several years. Tracy Moore, writing in MEL Magazine, explains:

“Ever had a woman remind you to call your mom on her birthday? Ever had a woman remember to send around a card for the boss’s birthday, then proceed to buy the card, pass it around, double check that everyone who wanted to sign it did (so no one would feel left out)?

Then you, sir, have been the recipient of emotional labor, also known as free, invisible work women do to keep track of the little things in life that, taken together, amount to the big things in life: the glue that holds households, and by extension, proper society, together.

First things first, though: Let’s not call it just emotional labor. Let’s also call it mandholding. If you’ve had a woman run the administrative energy of your life in the background, you’ve had your mand held. Man + handholding is the perfect portmanteau for what we mean by emotional labor. It’s women doing all the things men ought to know perfectly well to do. Or it’s men doing them, but only because a woman told them to. While the “stuff” could change depending on the man, the one thing all the stuff has in common is that women do it or tell men to do it, and they’ve been doing it or telling men to do it for so long that men don’t even notice.”

(<https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/the-stupid-easy-guide-to-emotional-labor>)

I’m guilty of this, and I suspect many men here are guilty of this.

This is a fairly gendered view of the world, and while nowadays we often think about blurring gender boundaries and fluid gender identities rather than fixed gender binaries, we cannot ignore the ways that gender is still a critical factor in our lives and our world.

The Torah is a commentary and the world and the world is a commentary on the Torah, it's been said. Here, I think the world is commenting on the Torah. The idea of emotional labor helps us read the episode in Chapter 20 of Numbers where Miriam dies and then there's no water.

The simplest reading is that the juxtaposition of the two verses, where Miriam dies, and then, immediately, there's no water, is that there's no connection. And ibn Ezra makes this point (in his short commentary on Exodus 16:5, brought on Numbers 20:2 in Michael Carasik's *The Commentators' Bible*), pointing out that in when people had nothing to drink in Numbers 17 at Rephidim, Miriam hadn't also died then.

But ibn Ezra is pushing back against Rashi, who, quoting a widely-known midrash that a well followed Miriam around the 40 years in the desert. And the midrash arises because of the immediate juxtaposition of the verses, a method of interpretation called "*smichut parshiyot*," which just means "juxtaposition of sections." It assumes that juxtaposition is not accidental, but rather intentional and meaningful. And maybe Miriam had a particular connection to water, and earned merit through waiting in the water, in the river to see what would happen to baby Moses.

But when she dies, there's no more well, no more water.

How did the Israelites mark Aaron's death? They mourned for thirty days. But how did they mourn Miriam? They didn't, and because they didn't mourn her properly, they were punished with not having enough water, suggests the Keli Yakar, in Prague in the 1600s.

But what if it went like this?

Miriam: Moses—I haven't been well. I think I'm dying.

Moses: Oh no, you'll be fine, you'll get better. It's just a little cold, or flu, or stomach thing. What was wrong with you again?

Miriam: It's my heart. I think my heart is giving out. By the way, did you get that Cushite woman you're married to, Tzipora, an anniversary present? It's next week?

Moses: Oh, not yet. Can you remind me to do it tomorrow? And what do you think she'd like?

Miriam: She loved those dolphin skins I helped you pick out last year for her. Why not some new ones? You have noticed, haven't you, that hers are getting a little worn out.

Moses: That's a great idea. Remind me when we pass by the spot with the dolphin skins in the desert to pick some up.

Miriam: I will if I'm alive, but there are some things you need to know before I die, because really, my heart might give out any minute.

Moses: I've been leading this people for 40 years. What else could I possibly need to know?

Miriam: Well, let's talk about water.

Moses: Water? What for? There's always water in the desert. God makes it come out of rocks, as it says in Psalm 78:15, "God split rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink as if from the great deep." The translation says "He," but I changed it to God because I know how you can't stand that masculine God language.

Miriam: So do you know the water schedule?

Moses: uhh... [looks confused]

Miriam: The schedule for when the water comes out of the rocks? It's really very simple. 2 to 3:14pm on Tuesdays, 2:14 to 3pm on Thursdays, 9:12am to 12:09pm on Mondays and Fridays (but not next Friday), and Wednesdays and Sundays 2:14pm to 3pm and 9:12pm to 12:09am.

Moses: I just thought the water came out. I never noticed there was a schedule.

Miriam: And do you know the schedule for which tribes get water when?

Moses: Why do we need a schedule for that?

Miriam: Don't you remember, the first time it happened, there was chaos, fighting, and then the water stopped coming out, and we were all thirsty?

Moses: That was so long ago.

Miriam: Anyway, you need to make sure you remember to stop in enough time wherever we are for people to get their water skins out to fill up at the right times, and don't let the Gadites butt in on Naphtali.

Moses: I can't remember all of this. I'm so busy leading the people.

Miriam: Well, when I'm gone, you're going to have to take this over. I figured it out. I'm sure you can too.

Moses: Maybe Aaron can help.

Miriam: Remind him about his anniversary in two weeks. And Elisheva likes lion furs. You can get them from that Reubenite guy in the 17<sup>th</sup> tent from the left, but make sure you go in the morning, because he's not there in the afternoon. And tell him to bring his son Elazar; he was annoyed last year that Aaron forgot to invite him.... And I also need to tell you about some changes that are happening next month to the water schedule. God wrote them down for you, but I've been taking those messages for the last 39 years since you just lose them in the clouds of glory.

Moses: I hadn't seen them in a while, now that you mention it.

Miriam: Also, I've been making sure we send thank you notes to all the tribes and small nations whose land we cross while we're wandering too. There should be enough stationary left to last until Joshua takes over. I've counted it out. *[Note here that Numbers 21 is all about conflict with the nations that Israel passes near, after Miriam's death.]*

Moses: Wow, you've been doing a huge amount, Miriam. I didn't realize it. You just always made it look so easy, like there was just a well following you around.

Miriam: A well? YOU THINK THERE WAS A WELL FOLLOWING ME AROUND?

Moses: Don't worry, Miriam. Calm down. Aaron and I will be able to handle all this.

*The Israelites—the entire congregation, arrived at the wilderness of Zin, on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there, and was buried there. The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron. (Numbers 20:1-2)*

Shabbat shalom!