

Ethics of the Mothers

Transcript

Okay. Wonderful. Good afternoon. Welcome, everybody. It's lovely to see so many familiar faces here with us. It's a pleasure to present a speaker today, a brilliant scholar and a good friend, Dr. Angie Cohen, who is the Ramon y Cajal Research Fellow at the Institute of Language and Cultures of the Mediterranean and the Middle East at the Spanish National Research Council in Madrid. Dr. Cohen holds a PhD from the Autonomous University of Madrid and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and she has held academic positions at Tel Aviv University, Concordia University, and the University of Calgary, both in Canada. And her research focuses on Sephardi and Mizrahi communities in Israel and in the diaspora, particularly in Argentina, with special attention to migration memories and experiences. women's religiosity, Sephardi feminism, and the everyday moral experiences of Sephardi women. She combines ethnographic fieldwork with feminist theory and Jewish thought to explore questions of tradition, care, and ethics and subjectivity, which are also the topic of her talk today. Angie, thank you so much for coming.

Thank you, thank you so much. It's really a pleasure to be here, and I want to thank Professor Jacob Yadgar for the kind invitation to participate, and to his family as well, for making things easy for me while I'm here and they're watching my baby. So thank you. What I'm going to share today comes from years of experience doing fieldwork in Israel, interviewing Sephardi women. So what I'm going to do is I'm going to present some fragments of interviews with women from whom I've learned everything I know about the feminine experience of Judaism. And I'm going to look at these fragments of interviews from the point of view of Jewish feminism. So I've organized the presentation in two parts. In the first, I will speak about the experience of obligation, and more specifically, obligation towards others, as something that only an adult can fully assume. This kind of obligation has traditionally been associated with mothers. Western liberal feminism has taken a rather dismissive attitude towards this ethical paradigm. And in our research, which draws on the debates within traditionist feminism, we return to the notion of obligation to the other in order to reconstruct a political and moral paradigm. So I'm working with different frameworks. First, the debates within what Jacob has translated it as a traditionist, of traditionist feminism, the feminism azawati in Hebrew, the feminism that is in dialogue with specifically with Sephardic traditions. And I'm going to look at these fragments of interviews from this perspective. I want to say that Otso Hefti here, she's a partner in this new project that

explores the tradition of blessings among Sephardi women in Israel, but I will get into that in a little bit. So on the second part of the talk, I will expand on this idea of obligation towards others by presenting my new project on blessings and healing among Sephardi Mizrahi women in Israel. So these are women with moral authority, women who are known because of their either with their healing powers or the power of their prayers. And people, both known and unknown to them, approach them to ask for prayers, for blessings, or just for companionship in moments of need. and I became conducting fieldwork for this project two years ago. And we have already collected 18 interviews. Most of the women that we have interviewed are of Moroccan origin, although we have also spoken with Bukharan women, Yemeni, Iraqi, and Iraqi women. Most of them immigrated, as I said, from Morocco or any of these places and arrived in Israel at a young age, although we also have second generation and even third generation. The interviews took place at their homes, and we were warmly received, and as a condition for beginning the conversation, we were served generous amounts of delicious food. So I will present then fragments of these interviews with women whom I see as bearers of an ethical and political paradigm of responsibility for others. one that deserves particular attention in today's really difficult and dark times. My work on the Jewish experience of Sephardi women also draws on my participation in the only Sephardi and feminist Beit Midrash that exists not only in Israel, but in the world, called arevot, arevot, women, women, weave in tradition. which is located in Jerusalem. In this space, we explore the notion of Torat Em, the Torah of the mothers. This concept embraces both the study of Sephardic Judaism, Sephardic Judaism's intellectual sources, the written and oral dimensions, and the exploration of women's practices and ethics in dialogue with the experiences and insights of Mizrahi feminism. So we approach ethics here as a social, moral, and political paradigm with much to say to the world today. At its center lies care for the other, understood as the defining experience of motherhood. I am particularly interested in this sense of obligation towards others, which I see as the core of an ancient and enduring experience, the experience of mothers who prioritize the needs of the other. In this sense, it represents a different moral and political paradigm, different from, and in my opinion, more reasonable than, the self-interest and individualism promoted by liberalism. Obligation towards others then lies also at the heart of women's religious experience in general, not only of Judaism. Anthropological research has shown that whether in religions led by women or in the ways women appropriate religious life within patriarchal contexts, we find a religiosity-shaped by concern for others and care for others, both near and far. So this is not specifically a Jewish phenomenon. The question of obligation is central to Judaism, and it's equally central to feminist thought. Obligation towards others, towards children, towards family, obligation rather than choice as the defining structure of life. the debates within Judaism, within feminism, have a lot to do with whether these obligations should be a choice or not. The Mara Benjamin, who is a Jewish philosopher that has read the adult experience of Judaism from the perspective of motherhood,

says that to be a Jewish adult means to be obligated. And these obligations are not a choice. Your obligation as a Jewish adult is not up to you to decide. You can be negligent or you can transgress, but the obligation is there. So she starts, so what she's saying is that motherhood is probably the last human experience in the liberal world that still holds onto this experience of obligation as not subjected to choice. You are obligated to the needs of your children, whether you choose it or not. Again, you can be a negligent mother, or you can ignore those needs, but those needs are there, and you are commanded. So Jewish feminism, in confronting the ritual exclusion of women, calls for their inclusion in the realm of obligation, while also participating in its critique and transformation. So when we think about Jewish feminism, I'm speaking about Halachic Judaism, so I'm not speaking about feminists who are Jewish, but women who do feminist work within Halachic Judaism, what they're asking, what they're demanding is to also be obligated, to be included in the realm of obligation. So this Torat Em, or the Torah of the Mothers, is a tradition, then, that encompasses both the oral and the written. the inherited and the newly imagined, so to say. But when we speak about obligation from the maternal experience, we also move on to another and more embodied and everyday plane, if you want. The vulnerability of our children shatters any fantasy of autonomy, opening within us a fragility that did not exist before them. That fragility makes us aware of our dependence on a world we cannot control and on a destiny that escapes us and yet inevitably affects our children. So our responsibility and our need to protect them binds us to that same dependence on others, on those around us, on what cannot be foreseen. The experience of that dependence lies at the heart of women's religion, not only of Judaism as practiced by women. The experience of the fact that we are dependent on others, on the world, on that we cannot foresee. So this experience of dependence and this experience of obligation that stand vis-a-vis the independence and autonomy paradigm of liberalism is what we are talking about today. As I mentioned, anthropological research shows that women's religious life is often closely tied to their concern for others, for the members of their families, for those around them, for the world. And I would like to illustrate this point with an example that I recorded during one of the interviews I recorded, I conducted in Israel with Hefzi last year. two years ago, as part of our research on blessings and religious culture among Sephardi women in Israel. But before I show this, I want to explain a little bit about this project. So the project is basically we travel around Israel and we interview women who are known for their blessings. This is the general title. with the general description. So this research explores a key aspect of women's religiosity, which has to do with the care for others, with taking responsibility for the health and well-being of others, including people they don't know. So sometimes people will call them and say, I know a woman who's trying to get pregnant, see if you can do something. I know someone who is very ill, see if you can do something. Or the woman who wants to get pregnant will go and visit them, or their family, or sometimes even their grandchildren's friends will call them. when they have an exam. So you have this lady lighting candles and praying so

that the exam will go well for these kids who she doesn't know. Anyways, so I want to illustrate this through a concrete story, which is the story of Tamar. Tamar, whose practices embody everything I've been describing. Tamar is one of those women whom people from all walks of life approach to ask her to pray for them because they trust in her sincerity and in the devotion with which she takes on the tribulations of others. Tamar grew up in Spanish Morocco, meaning in the former Spanish protectorate of Morocco in the north, and she emigrated with her family to Israel when she was young before getting married. She reads the entire book of Psalms every week, a book to which, as you know, healing and protective powers are traditionally attributed. It is common, as you probably all know, to carry a small book of Psalms as protection, to put it under the children's cribs, or, I don't know, my children have it in their agala, in their... Yeah. So reading the entire book of Psalms is a great effort that Tamar undertakes every week on behalf of others, many of whom she doesn't even know. When there are urgent cases, when someone needs a miracle, for example, Tamar gathers a group of friends she completely trusts. They divide the book of Psalms among them and read it in a single day. She knows that each of them will do so with the sincerity, devotion, and commitment that asking for a miracle deserves. So these are Tamar's words. At bedtime, when we were almost asleep, my mother would bless us. She would come, cover us, kiss us, and bless us. She said the blessing of the . And she also blessed us in Spanish. those words all the time, and I continue with that. I read the Talim from Saturday to Friday, but I don't read them for myself. I do it to heal others or so that they may find a partner. It has nothing to do with family. People always call me, all kinds of people, and say, look, there's a girl who is sick, and I like candles for her. So the Talim are for people she doesn't know. I always read Teilim from Saturday to Friday. I have 18 grandchildren. One chapter for each of them. I can't manage, if I can't manage to do it on Friday night, then I do it on Saturday. I light candles for my five children. I always have a few rabbis for whom I also light candles. My rabbis for Friday night. My rabbis for the end of the Shabbat. My rabbis for the middle of the week, if someone asks me to. I use a lot of candles. On Friday night, I light one for them, for the rabbis, and I also light a glass of oil for my parents, my husband, my brother, always, a large glass of oil. And for everyone who asks for getting a driver's license, for an exam, my grandchildren. I sit down, light a candle for them, and things go well. My grandchildren believe in this deeply. Grandma, it went well, right? You lit candles, the children believe in this too. I even have a special tefillah for studies. Tamar grew up watching her mother bless her and her siblings. People trust Tamar, whose prayers seem to reach God a little more directly than those of others. She receives phone calls from people she doesn't know. including her grandchildren's friends, who ask her to light candles for their exams. My grandchildren believe in this deeply, she says. The children believe in this too. Her children and grandchildren know that Tamar devotes herself to the work of asking for miracles for everyone, of keeping everyone in mind, strengthening the ground beneath their feet, straightening the paths that might be a bit crooked, and redirecting

the wind so that it blows in their favor. This is an ethical disposition, a concrete and practical way of taking responsibility for others. This means that there has been and continues to be, within women's religiosity, a way of experiencing God and His commandments that operates on an intimate plane, interwoven with familial and personal relationships. A feminist gaze on Judaism must recover this experience and give it a language, insisting on it as an integral part of the Jewish experience. Women's religion brings into the realm of the concrete what in the rabbinic tradition and Jewish thought has remained abstract and detached from everyday life. In other words, domestic Judaism sheds light on questions of obligation as part of the encounter between two people, a central theme in the philosophy of Buber, Levinas, or Rosenzweig. In this sense, scholars like Mara Benjamin do to Jewish studies what scholars like Maria Luisa Muraro or Sarah Rudek did for philosophy. They reread texts from within daily life, inspired by the experiences of women and specifically the experiences of mothers. So inspired by these authors, I propose that we view the Jewish experience of women, of women blessers, through the concrete blessers, I don't know, women that give blessings, through the concrete obligations that others impose on us. the children, the grandchildren, our family, our affections, and even those we do not know, but with whom, nevertheless, we share a world. At the same time, I propose that these actions mobilize care for the world within context of tradition. This kind of responsibility for others is part of a genealogy of care for future generations and for the transformation of the world. When we think about the most common ways in which the aspiration to transform the world has taken form, we often think of revolutionary movements. And I have personally long been interested in reading biographies of mothers involved in 20th century revolutionary movements, as well as those of their children. I have been very interested in this phenomenon, especially in South America, women that have participated in different revolutionary movements as moms in South America. Because of this interest of mine, I know that a theme that runs across many of these stories, especially their children's stories, is the idea that the mother was present for the future of the world, but absent from the lives of her own children. This is a theme that is maybe like expressed in different ways, but this is the basic idea. My mom was there for the world, but it was absent for me. In other words, the militant mother who devotes her life to the cause of improving the world through revolution, is often experienced by her children as detached from the concrete reality of their lives. The women we have interviewed for this project, by contrast, are in direct contact with the specific people that seek their help, sometimes in the radical way of asking them for a miracle. And like the aspiration to transform the world, care for others engages with the concrete Reality of those who... who stand before us in need. It's not a kind of activity that is directed at some sort of abstraction of the world. It is an activity that is directed to very specific people with very specific needs. In this sense, I believe that there is a political paradigm in this culture that has much to say to us today, but let us continue listening to them. Like Tamar, Many women who have assumed this role of support

from very this role of support come from various life trajectories. One of them is Menukha, whose story represents another way of arriving at the same ethical disposition. Menukha is a woman whose family came from Bukhara, Uzbekistan, to Israel in the 1940s. She blesses all the time. She offers blessings to her family, to her children, her grandchildren, and to anyone who comes to her asking that the wind might begin to blow in their favor. These are personal blessings not formalized in any book. What's particular about Menukha is that for many years she wanted to distance herself from what she perceived as her mother's primitive and superstitious culture. She wanted to be, in her own words, a modern woman, to study and to leave behind the rites, blessings, and practices of the women in her family. She told us how embarrassed she used to be about the way her mom used to talk about the weird things her mom used to do, and she didn't want to do anything with that. So she studied, she got married, and she had children. Then, during one of Israel's wars with its Arab neighbors, One of her sons was wounded and left in a wheelchair. This is what she told me. When my son was injured, I realized that our children do not need a modern mother, but a mother who blesses them as the grandmothers did. They need a Moroccan grandmother, a Bukharan grandmother. They don't need images of disaster. I will not send my son, the hero, to war. No, I will send him with the angels. When my son was injured, he was in the hospital, and I screamed at night in total despair. My mother-in-law took me to the tomb of the Baba Sali, and I didn't know what to do. Do you guys know who the Baba Sali was? And there are women who go pray at his tomb to ask for miracles. And I didn't know what to do. I was terribly embarrassed, and she said to me, Menukha, hold on. no, you just want to... Yeah, okay. I was seriously embarrassed and she said to me, Menukha, put your hands behind your back, bow your head and cry. I'm crying for him. And you, can't you cry for your son? Cry, beg, pray for him. What are you doing sitting there in silence? Then I understood that even if I am embarrassed, I can cry and pray. And I saw her crying and pleading and invoking the holy man. And as my mother used to say, I pulled God's coat. This idea of like pulling God's coat is, it's like pure poetry. Menukha screamed in despair at night without realizing that this was already a form of prayer. Standing before the tomb of Baba Sali, a Sadiq or a righteous man who stamped many visit to ask him to mediate for them in that mysterious space where the dead, the saints and God dwell. Her mother-in-law revealed all her ritual expertise. She knew how to pray because she knew how to surrender to dependence. And this is what she was saying. If I'm doing this, can't you do it? In that surrender, in that yielding of our autonomy, prayer arises, along with the strength to tug at God's coat so that he might look at us, listen to us, and protect our children. This is what Menukha realized, that her son did not need, not only, I would say, a mother who would accompany him, speak to the doctors, and trust in medicine. but a mother who would try to touch God, to grab him by the lapel and make him turn his face toward her son. It is no coincidence that the first prayer in which something is demanded of God is that of Hannah, who prays for herself without any mediation, moving her lips and uttering

words silently, inaugurating the manner in which Jewish prayer still is performed today. Hannah speaks directly to God from her despair, and asks him for a son. Elie sees her and thinks she's drunk, for he had never seen anyone pray like that. She rebukes him, making him understand that prayer, what prayer truly is, what it means to pray. Her prayer is face to face with God. So Hana represents what some interpreters have understood as the natural or spontaneous prayer, which is typically also associated with women. This is a kind of prayer that is not constrained by words, already marked by tradition. It's a prayer then born out of chaos, but also out of hope. So that same chaos and hope are present in the testimony of Menucha. and all of the mothers who pray for the recovery and healing of their children. For generations, this has been the way women prayed, because women didn't know Hebrew, didn't have access to Hebrew education, and it's actually very, very common to go to a synagogue today, especially the older women. Younger women, this is a different story, but the older women still don't know how to read Hebrew. So women's blessings then come from this same space of surrender to dependence, from the impulse to speak directly to God about their children and about those around them, who trust in the strength of their conviction and in the power of their prayer as intercession. So these experiences constitute half of the Jewish narrative, a half that until now has only been told within the intimate space of the family and has barely been transmitted and has been typically studied by anthropology, and very rarely within Jewish studies. In my generation, though, there are many women, especially in Israel, who, without being researchers themselves, recognize the ethical value of this chain of transmission and choose to continue it. For example, we interviewed Michal, a woman in her 40s who grew up listening to the blessings of her mother and her grandmother, within that Judaism of passionate care for others. So Michal, who studied at university and works in an archive, so she's an educated woman and a professional, said this to us. My son is very sensitive, so my husband says to me, bless him so that his sensitivity will work in his favor and will not trouble him. Or David Elai, this is another son, who's very bright. His father says, bless him so that his brilliance helps him and doesn't harm him. There's something about blessing that has to do with helping, with turning something to one's advantage. Because every quality can work in both directions. When I sometimes say that one of my sons is stubborn, my husband immediately says, don't say he's stubborn, say he stands up for his position. It's very important to him that I say things in a positive way, and that we don't instill in the child the idea that he simply is a certain way. Always bless him so that his traits will serve him well, so that they will work in his favor and not against him. Here, blessings appear as the parents' responsibility for how their judgments shape their children. The blessing then is a performative act of speaking, or rather, the expression of the awareness that speech is almost always performative, especially when it's directed to our children. So an important aspect of blessing has to do with speaking well. with saying things kindly, ensuring that form as well as content have a healing function. To speak well, to say, as many Moroccan grandmothers say,

Abinti, for example, my daughter, poor thing, my grandmother Raquel used to say, everybody was a poor thing. There's a gentleness. in this speech that envelops you. And this gentleness, this warmth, and sometimes sweetness in the way of speaking, is present in the blessing. And it has to do with how we imagine the effects of what we are saying. There is always the habit of always adding a protective formula, a protective formula, after recounting something bad. Lo Aleichem, may none of this happen to you. It expresses a will to speak well so that others won't be harmed. Blessings are a privileged site for the expression of women's ritual expertise and of the ethics that sustain their Jewish experience. At times, the impulse to heal or to intercede before God himself, to wrap him by the label and make him turn his face toward our children, sometimes contradicts orthodoxy or is borderline, how do you say when something is? Heresy. Heresy, yeah. A very particular, a very clear case is what goes on at the terms of Tzadikim, whether they're praying to the Tzadik, whether they're praying for the Tzadik to intercede, what exactly is happening there. Or I mean, some of these women also describe these interactions as conversations, conversations with the tadjim, or conversations even with family members. That this is, as you know, a no-no for the rabbis. You don't talk to the dead, and that's the end of the story. Whether it's a tadjik, not a tadjik, doesn't matter. So this is what Shoshi told us. This morning I prayed and spoke with him. Asher, Asher was her late husband. Asher, Ofil has bought that machine. I talked to him about the machine, the bar mitzvah. I cried and told him how hard it is for me that he's not here with me. Do you understand? I told him that I was going to buy the house. I want this house. Send me a sign. Sometimes he shows me a butterfly. A butterfly. A butterfly. For example, for instance, I want to travel abroad. Asher, I want to go to Prague. Send me a sign that you agree. I know he would be so happy. And suddenly I go out and see a butterfly. He's showing it to me. The butterfly is his soul. So when you go to the cemetery, what do you do? Do you talk to them? I ask her, and she says, to my parents, I only ask them to take care of me and of my children and grandchildren, to watch over us. Do you have conversations with them or only with Asher? Only with Asher. I talk to him every day. What do you think that Rabbanim, the rabbis, would say about this? I have no idea. I've never asked my uncles who are rabbis what they think about my talking to Asher, whether it's normal or not. Shoshi, this has, there are many things we could say about this, but it is very common that in segregated religions and segregated cultures, The men will have no idea what's happening in the women's world. The women know the man's world much better than the other way around. Shoshi regularly attends Torah classes and listens to this rabbanit, the rabbi's wife, from whom she says that she learns a great deal. Her children and grandchildren call her to receive her blessings. and they also ask her to pray for people she doesn't know. Every day she speaks with Asha, her late husband, and he keeps him updated on her troubles and needs and wants and asks for signs that he approves of her choices. This relationship with the dead, taboo in normative Judaism and dismissed by the rabbis as paganism or as non-existent when they describe this, I remember talking to a

very dear rabbi of ours, Rav Chaim Ovadia, who we were at the very beginning of this project that he said, look, this is something very extended. And yes, they are going and they are talking to this dead person. Now when we explain this, we have to say that they're doing something else, that they are asking for intercession, whatever. The reason is that if you go against this, you have to go against your own mother because this is very extended and everybody does it. So you have to sort of like frame it in a way that, to neutralize it. So this is exceptionally common, again, not only among Jewish women. but it is particularly relevant or interesting that it happens among Jewish women because it's so taboo and because it's a forbidden practice. So blessings are acts completely removed from helplessness. They are acts rooted in the belief that alternatives exist to the reality in which we live. In every personal blessing, such as those we have seen, there is an attempt to act upon reality, to orient reality toward the good. So these are acts guided by an imagination that is still capable of envisioning other realities. And in this sense, I say that blessings are acts of utopian imagination, part of our human capacity to continue playing a role in the transformation and healing of the world. This can also happen against the backdrop of deterministic or pessimistic ideas, such as the belief that destiny cannot be changed or that destiny has been set by God and there's nothing we can do about it. This is Simha, who said to us, when the creator of the world decrees, there is nothing to be done. There is an Abinti, my daughter. May God protect you. May you not see, may you see nothing bad without God's help, only good things. Simha is a Moroccan woman who was married off when she was 11 years old. Thanks to her determination, she managed to divorce at 17. Her story is filled with miracles and misfortunes, which she recounts with a sense of humor that she defends with the same passion with which she sought a different and better life for her daughters in Israel. Simcha is a protective shield for others. There is a humility from which a hand of solidarity is extended in the form of blessings and good wishes grounded in the belief that misfortunes happen when they are meant to happen, and that there is some sort of destiny that you cannot do anything about. But within this awareness, she extends this hand of solidarity. And within this idea that there are things that cannot be changed, she is there giving blessings to everyone and listening to everyone's needs. So such a vision that the reality of what happens, such a vision of a deterministic world that you can do nothing about when something bad happens, it just happens and there's nothing you can do. It doesn't, in the case of Simcha, for example, it doesn't generate discouragement or nihilism, to put it in political terms. Rather, it gives way to hopeful solidarity. May God protect you, may you see nothing bad, only good things. So she continues to bless you. even though she thinks that if something bad has to happen, it will happen. But I guess she will be there when that happens. So yeah, I'm almost done here. So the experiences that I have referred to are part of what some have called domesticated religion. Domesticated religion is not only a religion that takes place in the space of the home, but also refers to acts of cultivation, of care, of a moderation and channeling of religion according to women's experiences and

priorities. So it's not only domesticated in the sense that happens at the home, it's also domesticated as in something wild that you sort of channel so that it will be livable. The Jewish home, and I would say the home in general, is a privileged site from which to study culture. The perspective of the home also opens a perspective onto the world. So to dismiss the home as a lot of feminist research continues to, more than research honestly, a lot of feminist positions, tend to do to dismiss the home and the domestic sphere as merely forms of oppression is also to dismiss the gaze exercised from within the home, alongside the moral and even epistemic heritage that has been built in the home for generations. So there is an anthropology that comes from the domestic space. whose erasure may only reinforce the very dynamics that rendered the space of the home oppressive and limiting. Yeah. So I often say that Hefti and I began working on this project before the world ended in October 2023. Only a few months earlier, we were driving across different parts of Israel to interview Nashime Barchot, women who gave blessings, while my mother took care of my then very little baby, my first one. This project on care and responsibility for future generations became all the more relevant and perhaps even urgent as violence in the region intensified. The idea that these practices and this ethical heritage belonged to the space of maternal responsibility and that they could serve as a resource for peace became increasingly clear to me. I had in mind Sara Rudick's work on maternal thinking as the foundation for a politics of peace, but I also was thinking about these revolutionary mothers that I mentioned and how unquestionable it seemed that their work was directed towards the transformation of the world. The comparison between these two forms of responsibility for the world allowed me to articulate other kinds of comparisons between the ideas we hold and the actions we take, between our commitment to abstract ideals and our capacity to respond to someone's concrete needs, between rupture and revolutionary violence and continuity and care, between grand historical narratives and the concrete stories of people, So this project speaks to all of these tensions and offers us a paradigm that only, again, an adult can truly adopt. Our obligation toward the other as the very condition for any further commitment to healing of the world. And that's it. And these are some pictures.