

Who Cleans Your House?

by Alice Sparberg Alexiou



It has been nearly 40 years since Philip Roth made us squirm and shrink back in anxious revulsion with his description of Mrs. Portnoy's sly and awful avoidance of her cleaning lady's germs. (Didn't she keep a separate plate for the tunafish she made her, and make sure to boil her cutlery afterward?)

The relationship between women who hire someone to clean the house and mind the kids—or the frail elders—is complicated by the sometimes conflicting desire both to treat an employee fairly and to meet one's own need for help. From Zoe Baird's tumble from grace over failure to pay Social Security for her household worker to the scandalous behaviors of the master and mistress of the house catalogued in *The Nanny Diaries*, a nervousness about this sometimes fraught relationship shivers like a hidden stream through the daily lives of women who employ others to do what was traditionally women's work: cleaning, cooking, child care.

In the 1970s, controversies over housework had to do with domestic discontents of a different sort: wages for housework; the monetary value of a stay-at-home wife and mother; negotiating who does the laundry or the dishes. One study of household roles done in England a decade or two ago revealed the clear gender-role distinctions around housework. When married men were asked "Who cleans the toilets in your house?" most of them answered, numbingly oblivious to how damning the answer was, "I don't know."

Today women's feelings about housework may still include a sense of the injustice that married women, even those employed outside the home, still do more of the work in the home than their husbands do. But we're also aware of a different injustice, and the responsibility we have—as Jews and as women—to treat fairly the women we employ to do "women's work" in our own homes.

—Susan Weidman Schneider



*"It's my schmutz.
I should take
care of it."*

I am sitting in a Brooklyn diner, having breakfast with Marlene Champion, 61, a tall, striking woman from Barbados. Champion makes her living as a domestic worker, and right now she works as a nanny caring for a four-year-old girl in Brooklyn Heights. Champion is also an active member of Domestic Workers United, a Bronx-based organization fighting for domestic workers' rights. In the 16 years since she immigrated here, Champion has worked in several households, all Jewish. With the exception of one family which treated her badly, she says she's had good relations with all of them.

Champion felt especially close to a Dr. Steiner, whom she took care of for six years, until he died at 92 with Champion at his side. She was in charge of all his care—meals, laundry, cleaning. She accompanied him to all the family weddings. He had specialized in the study of tuberculosis, and he used to tell her stories about his work. Sometimes, he showed her his old slides. You'd make such a great doctor, or nurse, he used to tell her. Champion still keeps a picture of Dr. Steiner on her wall, and stays in close contact with his children.

After she finishes telling me her story, I say that my family had a housekeeper when I was growing up. I also say something that she probably already knows: that hiring domestic help is fairly common in Jewish households. And then I ask her what is special, if anything, about working for Jewish families.

She smiles. "We're of different races," she says. "But I think we have a lot in common."

When Jews hire people to do household jobs—anybody who cleans, cooks, does the laundry, cares for children or elderly parents—we are the ones who represent a privileged class, with the funds to hire help. Jews today are generally wealthier and better educated than most other Americans.

But the widespread practice of having "help" goes all the way back to our grandmother's day, when even Jewish families in modest circumstances very often had cleaning ladies, perhaps because the wages for domestic work were so low that even working-class families could often afford this small luxury. ("It wasn't as if you were putting on airs," a Jewish woman in her seventies told me. "Having a cleaning lady was socially acceptable.") Yet even the term "cleaning lady" indicates the awkwardness employers feel in the presence of a rather un-American class system. We don't need to call the electrician the "electrical fix-it gentleman," after all.

Today, two-career households need housekeepers and nannies and cleaning ladies even more than the stereotypical clean-floor-obsessed housewives of a previous generation might have. Indeed, some of the backlash against the women's movement focuses on this issue; the gains of middle-class women during the last three decades, critics charge, were achieved through the exploitation of other, less fortunate women. And despite previous efforts to elevate the status of housecleaners—in the 1970s, feminist activists in concert with workers' groups stated that fair pay for a job responsibly done was no different if you were a housekeeper than if you were any other kind of laborer—those attempts to craft a more businesslike context for domestic work never really took hold.

Our relationship with the women who work in our homes is still inherently an unequal one. This fact makes many of us so uncomfort-

able that some Jewish women refuse to have household help even if they can afford it. Breena Kaplan, 65, is an artist on Long Island who has always done her own cleaning. “It’s my *schmutz* [dirt], so I should take care of it,” said Kaplan, a “red-diaper baby” who grew up in “the Co-ops,” two Bronx apartment buildings populated in the 1940s and onward largely by left-wing Jews. Her father, who came from Russia a card-carrying Communist, made “a good living” in the textile business, and he insisted that Luba, his wife, have help in the house. Kaplan remembers Elizabeth, a tall black woman who smelled of starch and soap, standing over the sink, scrubbing the family’s wash. But Elizabeth didn’t last long, because Luba couldn’t stand the humiliation she felt at a black woman coming into her home and slaving away for her in, of all places, the Co-ops.

Some Jewish women attempt to deal with the discomfort they feel at the imbalance of power between them and their domestic workers by reframing the relationship as a collaboration. Carla Singer, a film producer in New York City, employs Grace Walker (not her real name) as a twice-weekly housekeeper. Singer says she really only needs Walker one day a week, but, “this is *tikkun* [repair of the world]. I know where my extra money is going—to support Grace and her son. If I send it to a charity, I don’t know where my money is going.” Singer feels that the *tikkun* is mutual—Walker helped her out at a very difficult time, after Singer had just made a hugely dislocating transition, she said, moving to New York from Los Angeles with her teenage daughter. One day, as Walker was helping them settle into a new apartment, Singer, stressed-out, snapped at her. Walker shot back, “You know, Carla, we’re partners in this.”

“She was right,” Singer said. “In a sense, she doesn’t work *for* me.”

Except that Walker *does* work for Singer. And it’s time to talk openly about the relationship between Jewish women and “the help” (almost always female) we employ in the intimate settings of our own homes and families, especially in the context both of the global discussion of immigration laws and the more local desperation of working mothers juggling many needs. According to Domestic Workers United, virtually all domestic workers today (and “domestic workers” is the term they prefer) are immigrants, the vast majority of them undocumented, which makes it all too easy for employers to exploit them, wittingly or not. The good news is that there’s movement to encourage Jews to treat those who work for us with fairness. Indeed, the Talmud enjoins us to treat those who work for us honestly, compassionately and with dignity.

A series of interviews with both Jewish employers and their domestic workers revealed that, happily, the mutual respect between Marlene Champion and the Steiner family is not unique. But I also heard awful stories about Jewish families who treat their domestic workers badly, ranging from subtle to not-so-subtle insults (recalling Philip Roth’s cringe-inducing scene of Portnoy’s mother and her treatment of the so-called

“*schvartze*” in *Portnoy’s Complaint*) and a real blindness to the basic needs of the employee, to allegations of physical and sexual abuse.

Some bosses, in flagrant disregard of Jewish teachings and basic consideration, don’t pay their domestic workers on time. “Do not withhold the pay of your workers overnight,” it says in Leviticus 19:13. (“I didn’t get to the bank today.”) Or, in a striking lack of empathy, some employers don’t recognize the dire financial consequences to a day worker—counting on the next day’s wages to pay the rent, or feed her kids—who gets a call the night before, announcing “I don’t need you tomorrow.”

Some employers mistreat their domestic workers in more subtle ways. Gayle Kirshenbaum, who is active in Jews for Economic and Racial Justice (JFREJ), a New York City-based grass-roots group with the stated goal of injecting a “progressive Jewish voice” into New York City politics, once remarked to a friend, also Jewish, how awful it must be for Caribbean domestic workers to have to leave their children back home with relatives. Her friend disagreed. “No, it doesn’t bother them,” the friend said. “They’re not like us.” Another woman spoke of her friend, a Holocaust survivor’s daughter in her fifties, living in a New York suburb, who confessed to feeling gratified when she ordered around a non-Jewish Polish immigrant cleaning lady. The one family that Marlene Champion said did not treat her well consisted of two ill and elderly parents, whom Champion looked after for eight months, and their adult daughter who lived nearby. The problem, Champion said, was the daughter. She would buy only enough groceries for her parents; Champion was expected to get her own food. (Over and over again domestic workers complained about employers who do not provide food). When Champion lifted the father from his bed to his wheelchair—something she had been trained to do—the daughter, likening Champion to a man, would call her “Harry.” And one day, when the daughter was visiting, Champion overheard a conversation between daughter and father. The father was telling his daughter how much he liked Champion, so much that he’d like to give her something. Maybe even some stock that he owned.

The daughter was furious. “Oh, no! They’re just the help!” she screamed loudly. Champion, although in another room, could not help but hear. “Give it to your grandchildren!”

oney, of course, is a real issue. Many domestic workers are badly paid. According to Domestic Workers United, some day workers receive as little as two dollars an hour; some live-ins are paid 250 dollars *a month*. Domestic Workers United recommends a living wage of 14 dollars an hour. Even

"They're not like us."

though labor laws technically protect all workers, documented or not, in reality the laws fail domestic workers. Domestic workers do not have the right to unionize, and most are undocumented immigrants, which makes them doubly vulnerable. These facts make it nearly impossible for them to demand such rights as health care, severance pay, paid vacation, sick days, notice of termination—all things that we would likely assume were due us if we were the employees ourselves. But how domestic workers fare depends entirely on the will, good or ill, of their employers.

Jeannie Prager spoke to Lilith about how these issues play out in her tightly-knit modern Orthodox community in a New Jersey suburb: “We are the people who seem to hire the most housekeepers. And we’re doing a terrible job.” Prager knows this, because over the years she’d gotten quite an earful, both from Victoria Smith (not her real name), her former housekeeper, and from Smith’s schmoozing friends, who often hung out at the house.

Prager recently fired Smith, who’d been with her for 13 years, providing care to Prager’s ailing nonagenarian mother for the last nine of them. “It was time for a change,” Prager said. “She was always on the phone. Her friends who worked in the neighborhood often stopped by for a bite and a chat on their way home. It was all just too much, too much noise and commotion.” Letting Smith go was a tough decision, though. “She was a godsend in many ways. And a 13-year relationship, with two women sharing one kitchen, becomes a very close friendship.” When Prager finally got the words out, she gave Smith two days’ notice and \$5,000, six weeks’ severance pay. Smith, also eligible for unemployment compensation, was furious. “I always held you up on a pedestal,” Smith told her employer. “But my friends always warned me. And now I see that they were right, that you’re just like all the rest.” “The rest,” of course, meant the rest of the Jews. Prager felt horrible. But despite Smith’s anger, she and her family

paid a shiva call when Prager’s mother died shortly after the firing.

It took Smith seven months to find a comparable job. Prager said she was the one to find it for her. (Smith declined several requests to speak with Lilith directly.) In the Prager household, Smith had two weeks off annually to start, increased to three

weeks at her 10-year anniversary, five sick days, three personal days and “of course,” said Prager, paid holidays. Prospective employers, responding to the ad Prager posted for Smith on the shul’s website, kept telling her they’d never heard of a housekeeper getting paid vacation time.

Worried, Prager approached her rabbi with the idea of starting a discussion in the congregation about practices around hiring household help. “I feel that if some of these women [employers] could speak in a safe environment and

In case you thought this was a new problem...

“You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or stranger in one of the communities of your land. You must pay him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets, for he is needy and urgently depends on it....”

(Deuteronomy 24: 14-15)

“Do not send him [the servant] away empty-handed. You shall give him a severance gift from your flocks, from your threshing floor, and from your wine cellar...”

(Deuteronomy 15: 13-14)

“When you come [as a worker] into your neighbor’s vineyard, you may eat as many grapes as is your desire, to your fill, but you may not put any into a receptacle.”

(Deuteronomy 23: 25-26)

say what bothers them, and likewise for their housekeepers, we would all benefit,” she said. The rabbi said her idea was interesting, and that was the end of it.

Prager had nailed it, though her rabbi wasn’t listening. But at least one rabbi is: Rabbi Ellen Lippmann of the Brooklyn congregation Kolot Chayeinu devoted last year’s Rosh Hashanah sermon to employing domestic workers, not a usual High Holidays theme.

“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,” she said. And often, she added, we are not. “Not out of malice, but out of busy-ness and lack of thought.” Lippmann cited the story of Sarah and Hagar, whom the infertile Sarah mistreats when Hagar conceives. According to the medieval commentator Ramban, Lippmann says, “Sarah sinned when she did this and so did Abraham by letting it happen.” She added: “When we hire someone to work in our homes, we must see that person as fully human, seen by God.”

Lippmann, like Kirshenbaum, is active in JFREJ. Two years ago JFREJ embarked on a “Shalom Bayit” campaign in partnership with Domestic Workers United. JFREJ also hosts small group discussions in people’s homes, the “living room project.”

As part of the campaign, JFREJ members conduct discussions in synagogues about the just treatment of domestic

*"I shouldn't
have to pay."*

workers. Last year, for example, Kirshenbaum and two DWU members, Marlene Champion and Allison Julien, were invited to visit Temple Beth-El in Great Neck, an upscale New York suburb, for the congregation's Social Action Shabbat. The women spoke about domestic workers rights. JFREJ's membership is decidedly left-leaning. In their Shalom Bayit campaign, JFREJ is trying, says Kirshenbaum, "to broach the line between progressive and more traditional Jews," because it is clear "how deeply this issue resonates in the Jewish community" in both directions. Jews are employers, she said, and they also want to do right by their employees.

"Doing right" means putting your money where your mouth is. At the living room meetings JFREJ organizers talk about the specifics of treating domestic workers in a professional manner. Which means, for example, offering full-time employees a contract. The standard contract, based on a DWU model specifies, for example, what responsibilities the job does—and does not—entail, how many paid sick days and vacation days the employee is entitled to, what the rate of payment will be for overtime work, the medical care the employer agrees to pay for, such as checkups and ob-gyn exams, and what the food arrangement will be.

The document explaining the contract goes out of its way to assure employers that using a contract is good for them, too, leading to more loyalty from the employee, and an end to abrupt departures (there's a "must give notice" clause). But it may take a while to shift employers from the current more casual (and less fair, though less costly) model of doing business. The JFREJ-DWU presentation last year at Temple Beth-El of Great Neck, said social action committee chairwoman Alice Fornari, did not get much of a response. "The evening ends and then it's over," Fornari said. Other social-action subjects—stopping the genocide in Darfur, for example—get a significant response from the whole community, said Rabbi Rabbi Darcie Crystal, who organized the social action Shabbat with Fornari and supported the domestic workers issue. With domestic help it's a different matter. "It's a very risky topic for a social action Shabbat," Fornari told me. "People don't want it in their face." People, she said, would rather hear about, say, Israel. In other words, issues and places that are far away.

"I don't think most people care about the rights of domestic workers," Fornari said. "They don't feel it's a topic that's relevant to their lives, even though the women they hire are taking care of their homes and their children. People don't want to talk about it because they don't want to do anything about it." It is a topic dear to her, Fornari said, because of her involvement with each of the housekeepers she has employed over the years in her own home. She helped one, who came from Bolivia not knowing any English, to get into college; the woman is now a teacher. Extensive interviews reveal that many Jewish employers have tried similarly to improve the lives of their housekeepers; Fornari's behavior, like Prager's, is not an isolated phenomenon.

Fornari is determined to continue the conversation that she started at Temple Beth-El. She would love to see a "living room" session in Great Neck.

Fair Practices

Domestic Workers United (718-220-7391) suggests that a written contract between employees and fulltime household help will make life smoother for the employer and will "minimize misunderstandings by documenting agreements carefully and completely." In addition, the use of the contract is being pitched as a device for "promoting the provision of quality care for families and homes; workers who feel recognized and respected will do their job better."

The items in the model "standard contract" include a list of work responsibilities, number of children to be cared for (if any), rate of pay per week and amount per hour for more than a 40-hour week (live out) or 44 hour week (live in), plus:

- Day of the week and time of day when the wages will be paid
- A pledge by the employer to provide a letter of reference at the end of every year of employment
- Agreement on paid civic holidays, personal days and religious holidays
- Provision for using telephone, kitchen and bathroom
- A suggested one month's unpaid maternity leave

Kirshenbaum described hosting such a meeting at a home in Park Slope, Brooklyn, a neighborhood where a majority of the women pushing strollers on the streets look to be other than the babies' mothers. "There were perhaps 11 people there. We raised issues like the fact that if you go on vacation, you need to pay your domestic worker. And people said, but no, if I'm going away, I shouldn't have to pay."

"But then," Kirshenbaum continued, "I could see people shifting categories, for the first time. It was like light bulbs going on. These women had thought of their domestic workers as casual baby sitters, not as women who were counting on this salary to pay their own household bills. And now, they were suddenly realizing, 'We are employers and they are our employees, and of course I get sick leave, so why shouldn't they?'"

"There is no shame in hiring someone to work for us," Kirshenbaum said. "The only shame is in not treating them well." ●

Alice Sparberg Alexiou is a contributing editor at LILITH and the author of *Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary* (Rutgers University Press, 2006).

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