

Rosh Hashana Morning 5781
Congregation Tikkun v'Or, Ithaca NY
Rabbi Shahar Colt

I'm going to start with some community participation here. Please raise your hand (physically or using the "hand raise") if this is your first Rosh Hashana attending services on zoom.

Looks like this is pretty new for everyone! We should honor the fact that we are part of the first ever cohort of Jews observing this holiday through zoom.

Obviously, we are living through "unprecedented times" and experiences due to COVID19. The pandemic has taken many lives and is wreaking havoc on life as we knew it. It's raising many questions about how to continue all aspects of our lives, including our Jewish lives.

This summer I was part of a research fellowship through Truah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, studying Jewish responses to ethical issues raised by COVID19. We studied how to approach surveillance concerns in the context of contact tracing, the public health strategy of tracking and stopping the spread of a disease. As part of my research I spoke with Diana, a former congregant of mine who worked as a contact tracer in Massachusetts this spring. In this role, she would get the phone number of someone who had tested positive for COVID. Her job was to call them with three goals: make sure they understood the obligation to quarantine, make sure they had what they needed to quarantine, and find out who they had had contact with so that those people could be notified to quarantine.

I wanted to understand her experience as to how they dealt with concerns about the security of people's sensitive information. As COVID was disproportionately striking black and brown communities with a host of reasons to be concerned about government surveillance, were people responding to her phone calls? Would people really give out the names of those they had been in contact with?

Diana confirmed that people were responsive- so responsive that COVID rates had fallen far enough that she had been laid off. I believe that the reason she and the other contact tracers on her team had been so effective was because they approached this work with such patience, care and nuance. While they did convey hard messages about quarantining, they connected people with resources and social workers. The contact tracers called regularly to check in on the person quarantined to make sure they were doing ok. They listened carefully to people's stories, and adapted their communications in ways that they thought would most likely be heard.

Importantly, they were humble in a key way: they only asked questions relevant to stopping COVID; specifically, nobody was asked anything about their immigration status. The contact tracers received their information on who to call from the public health department, and to the best of Diana's knowledge, what they learned went back to the public health department. She described it as a closed circle.

Since contact tracing itself is a relatively recent approach developed in the field of public health, we couldn't study it directly in Jewish sources. Instead we looked to Jewish responses to census

taking as a way to explore Jewish historical, emotional and ethical conceptions of a government body collecting sensitive information from private citizens.

A Hebrew word used in the Torah to describe taking a census is “*pakad*.” It has many meanings. For census taking it means pass in review, muster, or number.

My havruta, that is, my study partner, and I learned pretty quickly that taking a census is tricky business. In the Bible, when God orders a census taken, it goes fine, for example God commands Moses and Aaron to take two censuses of the Israelites in the desert. In fact, Rashi, a medieval commentator, says that God loves the people so much that God counts us from time to time. Imagine a kid with a collection of rocks or stamps who goes through the collection periodically to admire them all and make sure they’re all there. However, when a person, for example, King David, takes initiative to count his subjects, God gets angry and punishes David with a pestilence on Israel.

I think it points to a central tension around census taking and numbering. While valuable information may be gathered for legitimate government purposes, counting and tracking people can give the count-er power over those people counted. King David specifically learned the number of men and the number of soldiers- presumably so he could enlist them.

With all this in mind, I couldn’t avoid noticing that the first line of our Torah portion this morning reads, “*VAdonai pakad et Sarah*,” In this case it means “God took note of Sarah.” The full line reads, “God took note of Sarah as God had promised, and God did for Sarah as God had spoken.”

In a previous chapter we had learned that Abraham and Sarah had no children, to their great sadness. Finally, late in her life, God took note of Sarah, and her particular pain and longing, and she became pregnant. Perhaps it is a sign of these times, or my heightened awareness of the gift of a child, in my first year of parenting, that I am drawn to any depiction of the divine in a way that shows care and loving attention. When God took note of Sarah in her pain of childlessness and desire for a child, this action feels truly moving.

It turns out that the same verb, *pakad*, that means to “count” - as in take a census- and “take note of” as in “God took note of Sarah” can also mean “look after,” “attend to” “care for,” “pass in review” “assign” or even “punish.” Even for Hebrew verbs, this is quite a wide array of meanings and emotional connotations! What they all share in common is a deep level of attention to the details of a person’s life.

Being seen fully can be transformative, as in the sense of God seeing Sarah’s pain, and remembering to act on her behalf, but in order to let ourselves be seen in this vulnerable way, we take a risk. For the person being- “*pakad-ed*” there is a level of anxiety- am I being seen in an understanding or critical light? Will I be *looked after* as a result, or *punished*?

In the Rosh Hashana liturgy of the *unetane tokef* prayer this emotional tension is explicit. Richard chanted:

... all creatures shall parade before you as a herd of sheep. As a shepherd herds their flock, directing their sheep to pass under their staff,
Ken ta'avir...v'tifkod - the same root as pakad... so you shall pass, count, and record the souls of all living, and decree a limit to each person's days, and inscribe their final judgment.

This is a powerful passage that invites a range of emotional responses. On the one hand it can be quite intimidating to imagine a God who knows all and reckons our lives. On the other hand, it can be empowering to know that we are the actors- it is our actions that we record ourselves in this metaphorical “book of life.” We have the power to write our own destiny, so to speak, or at least act better going forward. The image of God as the shepherd is traditionally a comforting image. A good shepherd does not lose sheep or let them get hurt. But the idea of God decreeing a limit on a person’s days is chilling.

So what do we do with this, especially if, like me, you don’t believe in an omnipotent God somewhere out there in the sky who is actually watching you?

It helps to recognize that while the God described in many Jewish texts appears as a character external to people, we don’t have to envision God in this way. One of the most powerful ways I experience divinity is in relationship with other people. I feel this especially in this pandemic, when there can be no such thing as a casual interaction due to social distancing. As we are hyper aware of each person and ourselves as potential disease vectors, we can also become hyper aware of the sacred potential in those relationships with our loved ones, our friends, even our acquaintances that we took for granted being able to greet in casual encounters, for example, after shabbat services. It’s not exactly that we can’t connect to each other anymore. We live in a magical time of electronic communication possibilities, and we can get together in person, while being mindful of pandemic precautions. We do need to be much more purposeful about how we do it.

I invite us to take these images in *unetane tokef*, which surround the idea of *pakad* - God taking note, God keeping track, God as holder of the book of life, God as shepherd- as a reminder of the power we have to take note and to count each other. The Torah texts depicted that only God should have the power to take a census because taking note, counting and accounting for each other is serious, sacred business. But we are made in God’s image. We actually do have the capabilities to do all the aspects of *pakad*. Since we have these capabilities, we must use them in Godly ways, by cherishing each other as God cherishes us, as opposed to using each other as a means to our own ends, as a king counts his subjects to make them soldiers. In the language of *unetane tokef*, we must be shepherds for each other. We must inscribe ourselves in the “book of life” by reaching into our own hearts and out to each other lovingly and carefully, from our prescribed physical distance.

As Diana described, contact tracing requires nuance, patience and humanity. Importantly, it works to save our lives, as we are all one biomass, sharing the air we breathe. This Rosh Hashana, let’s take a lesson from her approach to contact tracing. *T’shuvah* the central project of these days of awe, is a sort of contact tracing in its own right. Practicing *t’shuvah* involves

reflecting on who we've touched, and who has touched our lives, in the past year. How do we tend to each of those contacts?

As we sit together but separated this Rosh Hashana, I invite us to approach the task with the same patience, nuance and humanity that Diana described. Let this be a year when we can see ourselves lovingly and patiently and humanely. Let this be a year where we strive to see others lovingly, patiently and humanely. Let us attend to our contacts. Let us protect our contacts. Let us support our contacts in living their best lives, and let us commit to living our best lives so that we can all be vectors of blessing. And in this way, may we all write ourselves into the book of life, together.

Ken yehi ratzon - May it be Your Will.