

The traditional Rosh Hashanah morning reading is Genesis 21 while the traditional second day Rosh Hashanah reading is Genesis 22. As we, like so many Reform Jews, only celebrate one day of Rosh Hashanah it was decided to read Genesis 22, focusing on the story of Abraham and Isaac. But Genesis 21 is an important story too. The story of Abraham and Sarah being blessed with Isaac in their old age, and the story of Sarah and Hagar, and of Abraham's first born son Ishmael.

The chapter begins

וַיִּהְיֶה פָקֹד אֶת־שָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה לְשָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר:

JPS translates this verse as: GOD took note of Sarah just as promised, and GOD did for Sarah what had been announced.

But I want to draw your attention to the Hebrew - most especially to the word *pakad*, the second word and the first verb of the sentence has been translated in many ways:

JPS says “took note”

Everett Fox says “took account”

Koren says “visited”

And various others say “remembered”

Rabbis Janet and Shelly Marder, translators for the CCAR's new Torah commentary which is not yet out, shared their translation during a webinar with rabbis as “attended.”<sup>1</sup> Their translation of the entire verse reads:

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<sup>1</sup> Webinar held on 9/5/2024 for CCAR rabbis.

“Adonai attended to Sarah as promised, and did for Sarah what Adonai had declared.”

The variety of interpretations of the word *pakad* reminds us that Hebrew is much more nuanced than we often give it credit for - and too many people treat translations of the Hebrew, whether into English or another language - as the singular Word of God, also known as Biblical Literalism.

Rabbi Janet Marder shared that one of the reasons they chose to translate *pakad* as “attended” is that there are so many different understandings of the word attended, just like there are so many different understandings of the word *pakad*. The act of remembering is very different from the act of taking note of something. Rabbi Marder shared that one way of thinking about the deeper meaning of the word encapsulates the ideas of paying close attention to another person’s pain, responding to the pain and intervening to help. She also shared that perhaps this word could help us define a Jewish ethic of human relations - that is, seeing another person deeply, looking beneath the surface, not averting our eyes from painful sights, and doing what’s in our power to alleviate suffering.

While listening to Rabbi Marder speak, I was inspired to use her teaching as the basis for this morning’s sermon, where I hope to share a little about our relationship as American Jews with both the Jews and non-Jews who live in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. I cannot help but see the connection between our Torah readings for Rosh Hashanah and our current moment. Mourning the loss of all those murdered on October 7th, mourning the loss of all the soldiers killed since, mourning the loss of all of the civilians in Gaza, mourning the loss of homes, schools, places of

worship, and the list goes on. We must recognize that our pain can, and must encompass all the lives lost: Israeli and Palestinian and all those who call the land between the river and the sea their home.

It is not easy to share these words because I know that I will upset someone, I recognize how fragile we all are in this moment. I am only human and I have feelings, opinions, and experiences that shape how I see this current moment. I therefore ask that you join me on a journey of the past year. \*PAUSE\* On October 7th, my first reaction to hearing the news that Hamas had breached Israel's border was one of resignation. Resignation because I knew there was no response by Israel's government that would not spark an armed conflict. I remember September 11th, and this country going to war. There was no other response that anyone was willing to consider in the direct aftermath of an attack on US soil. The same was true on October 7th. When one is attacked, one fights back.

I also knew, on October 7th, that the world would blame Israel. Because even though many people still see Israel as David in a world against Goliath, it is no longer true. Israel's military might is significant. With or without the support of the United States. With or without the support of the United Nations or the European Union. Israel is a military power, and therefore I was frustrated but unsurprised by the world's response to Israel's invasion of Gaza. Somehow Israel was the aggressor even as Hamas held over 250 hostages and had murdered over 1200 individuals. 1200 souls taken violently from this life, many of whom suffered sexual violence prior to their deaths and others who had their bodies mutilated for sport.

I had a moment of hope that the fighting would stop when the ceasefire was agreed to in November. When we saw the release of some of the hostages. But it was not to be. And with the renewal of fighting the allegations, beginning in January, against employees of the UNRWA came to light. The UNRWA is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East - which is a UN agency that supports the relief and human development of Palestinian refugees. I learned recently, as processing the news of the war could very well be a fulltime job, that back in August, the UN announced that nine staff working for its Palestine refugee agency UNRWA would be sacked because they may have been involved in the 7 October 2023 Hamas-led attacks against Israel. Though the allegations came to light in January, it took until August for a decision to be announced. These cases continue to work their way through the internal reporting mechanisms, and more is likely to come out in the months to come.

Each step of this conflict has brought out the best and the worst in people. It has brought out the great desire for peace from many Israeli organizations. It has brought out antisemitism that went underground for many years both here in the U.S. and around the globe. It has brought the plight of the Palestinian people, who have never truly had the opportunity to govern themselves, once again to light. It has brought more people to Judaism or back to Judaism, even as the conflict has caused families to be unable to converse because of differing opinions on what should be happening. Each of us has taken a different approach to attending to the situation. Some of us have found ourselves deep in grief, mourning the loss of life. Others have found themselves newly minted advocates for the State of Israel or the Palestinians living in Gaza. I have seen a large increase in an interest in the history of the State of Israel and in the history of the conflict. I

know people who ask how we can preach peace and coexistence when the Jewish State is occupying other People's land. While others share their long history with the Holy Land as Jews. The examples go on and on because each of us has different life experiences and therefore no two stories are alike - and yet each truth is authentic to the person willing to share it.

Our story, the story of the Jewish people, began with Abraham. While we trace our history through Isaac, Sarah's son, the Muslim people trace their history through Ishmael. And the Christians see themselves as another piece of this family tree. The three Abrahamic faiths. This is at the root of the desire to control the land between the river and the sea. The land of our ancestors. But it is the land of all of our ancestors, not just one. We are all related, we are all part of a family tree that extends for generations and thousands of years. This very complicated reality is what I find hard to explain to individuals when asked about the ongoing conflicts in Israel/Palestine and the occupied territories in the West Bank. This conflict did not begin in 1967 or 1948. It did not begin with Theodore Hertzl in 1897 at the First Zionist Congress. It did not begin with the expulsion of Jews from country after country throughout the centuries nor before or with the Crusades. It goes even further back, and the only way we recognize the need to make peace is by recognizing the baggage being carried by generation after generation. The trauma and the pain. The loss of life and the inability to see humanity in the other. None of this is easy, and I also cannot see a way forward that does not include a recognition of the pain and suffering of generations alongside a plan for peaceful coexistence.

In order to have a future, we must embrace all aspects of *pakad*, as God did in regards to Sarah. We must embrace the need to pay close attention to our neighbor's pain alongside responding to

our own pain so we can move forward to intervene and help. We need to see our neighbor, whether here in the U.S. or in Israel/Palestine or anywhere else in the world, we need to look beneath the surface of pain and trauma, looking deeply rather than averting our eyes and do everything in our power to alleviate the suffering. The suffering of the hostages, the suffering of the children, the suffering of the families who have lost loved ones, the families who have lost their homes, the individuals who have lost their way. Our responsibility is to see the individuals as a part of our extended family, the family of humanity, and work towards peace.

As we celebrate our new year, as the calendar turns from 5784 to 5785, I pray that we see a ceasefire, the release of the hostages both alive and dead, and a commitment to move forward with a plan for peaceful coexistence that recognizes the humanity of each and every individual. That recognises terrorism is not the answer. That notes the desires of all the different peoples who call the land between the river and the sea home.

Oseh shalom bimromav Hu Ya'aseh shalom aleinu Ve'al kol Yisrael Ve'al kol Yoshvei Teivel Ve'imru, Amen. May the One who makes peace in the heavens Make peace upon us And upon all Israel And upon all who dwell on this earth And together we say: Amen