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Sermon on Vayishlach, 12/6/2014

The Hasidic rabbi Hanokh of Aleksandrow gave this explanation to the Talmudic saying, “This world is like a wedding hall.”

A man came to an inn in Warsaw. In the evening, he heard sounds of music and dancing coming from the next house.

“They must be celebrating a wedding,” he thought to himself. But the next evening he heard the same sounds, and again the evening after that.

“How can there be so many weddings in one family?” the man asked the innkeeper.

“That house is a wedding hall,” answered the innkeeper. “Today one family holds a wedding there, tomorrow another.”

“It’s the same in the world,” the rabbi taught. “People are always enjoying themselves. But some days, it’s one person and other days it’s another. No single person is happy all the time.”

The world may, indeed, be like a wedding-hall: Every day is the day of *someone’s* celebration.

But—and not to be too grim—might it not also a cemetery? Every day, *someone* buries a person dear to him. We might even think of the world as a hospital—a place for the comingling of stations of life: Some visit the terminally ill, others rejoice in healing, and there are those celebrate new life.

There’s a reason no single metaphor for the world is sufficient: In our lives, we experience the world as wedding-hall, cemetery, hospital, and many other places. The very nature of life is that we must shift from experience to experience—*change* is a basic element of our being. **However**, change is not always easy. Sometimes changes in our lives can be radical, and they often happen without warning or our control. Whether good or bad—foreseen or unforeseen—changes in our lives can be difficult to manage. It can be a struggle to realize that

the lives we lived a week or a month ago are so dramatically different from the lives we have today.

Adjusting to change in our lives takes effort and energy. **However, there are ways we can cope with it.** Whether our greatest dreams or our worst nightmares suddenly play out, it is possible to help ourselves so that we can adapt to new realities.

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In our week's torah portion, Jacob's life changes in many ways. Within the 5 chapters of parashat Vayishlach, 1) Jacob reconciles with his older brother Esau after a tense, cautious encounter; 2) He wrestles with an angel and is given a new name; 3) His daughter is raped and his sons slaughter all the men of Shechem's city. Even more than this—within a span of 11 verses—4) Deborah—Rebekah's nurse—dies in the midst of Jacob and his family, 5) Jacob purifies his household and is approached by God, who includes Jacob in the covenant of Abraham and Isaac, and finally—and I believe this counts as numbers 6 and 7—6) Rachael gives birth to Benjamin 7) but dies in childbirth.....[Sigh].....*that* is a long week.

As we all probably know well, Jacob is a *challenged* character of the Torah. He does a lot of good and bad, has relationships both positive and negative, and he alternates between failure and triumph in his continual attempt to adapt to the changing conditions of his life. **Jacob, more than any of the other patriarchs, was a man who knew how to weather a storm.** Given this, he might be the best figure of the Torah from whom to learn about how to manage the extreme changes which can occur in life. The 11 verses which are particularly action-packed, Genesis

35:8-18, are especially instructive, because **so** much happens to Jacob **so** quickly. There are some important lessons embedded in these verses about how we can manage change in our own lives.

In Genesis 35:8, we read that *Deborah, Rebekah's nurse died, and she was buried below Beth-el under the oak; and the name of it was called Allon-bacuth*. As commentators historically have noted, this is a strange verse: Deborah's presence at all in the narrative seems random, and the mention of her death and burial place appears to be a non-sequitur. Breishit Rabbati makes sense of this verse by reaching back to when Jacob had to flee from his brother earlier in the Torah: At that time, Rebekah told Jacob that she would send for him when the time was right. According to this source, Deborah was the messenger whom Rebekah sent to get Jacob to come home.

There is not much we know about Rebekah's nurse, Deborah, from the Torah—the mere fact that she is not known just by her name, but as Deborah—*Rebekah's nurse* suggests that she was a peripheral character. However, there is some beauty about the way she is included in this context. The loss of a family member, even just a parent's nurse, was undoubtedly a hard loss for Jacob: We can infer so much from the fact that they named the place where she was buried, under a tree, אֵלוֹן בְּכוֹת, *the tree of weeping*. What is touching about this is that we can discern, from the text, an element of how Jacob managed to adjust to this change in his family: While Deborah was not his blood-relative, she was a member of his family system. We can imagine that the same connection which makes Deborah's death **relevant** to Jacob is the one which allows Jacob to be comforted after she dies—she is part of his personal support network. It is interesting to note that the Torah does not write, “he, **Jacob**, buried Deborah under beth-el, under the tree,” but rather that “she **was buried** under beth-el, under the tree”: The use of the passive voice here

allows us to fill in the way this act took place, in a way which strikes me as most likely: Jacob probably relied on his support system, family and friends, for help while he grieved.

I would compare the importance of a family and social system to the significance of tzedakah as described in one famous passage of the Babylonian Talmud, in tractate Bava Bathra:

**What is the meaning of the verse, *And God put on righteousness as a coat of mail*? It tells us that just as in a protective coat of mail **every small scale** joins with the others to form one piece of armor, so **every little sum** given to charity combines with the rest to form a large sum. R. Hanina said: The same lesson may be learnt from another verse: *And all our righteousness is as a polluted garment*. Just as in a garment **every thread** unites with the rest to form a whole garment, so **every penny** given to charity unites with the rest to form a large sum.**

The notion that charity accumulates, and piece-by-piece comes together to protect those who are righteous, might similarly apply to those who individuals we add—**one by one**—to our social and family systems. The entire Biblical verse which the Talmud discusses reads as follows: *And God put on righteousness as a coat of mail, and a helmet of salvation upon God's head, and God put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak*. When applied to a support system, we should think of those who help us as our aid and defense: a coat of mail, a helmet, garments, and a cloak. In Jacob's case, he may have been protected by those close to him: His wives, children, attendants, and friends.

Another method of coping with change can be seen in how Jacob purifies himself, **then** encounters God. Verses 2-3 and 10-12 read: *Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that were with him: "Put away the strange gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your garments; and let us arise, and go up to Beth-el; and I will make there an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went."...* *And God said unto him: "Your name is Jacob: your name shall not be called any more Jacob, but **Israel** shall be your name"; and God called his name Israel. And God said unto him: "I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of you, and kings shall come out of your loins; and the land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, to you I will give it, and to your seed after you will I give the land.'*

I think the **purification** which Jacob performs, as a whole, is quite striking. Jacob is, of course, not quite sure what will occur after he becomes prepared. Nevertheless, he does all that is in his power to be ready for whatever take place. This reminds me of the story of one of my personal heroes, a bagpiper by the name of Bill Millin. He is best remembered for a remarkable feat of bravery at Sword Beach, during the allied landing on D-Day.

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After the bloody battles of World War I, the British Army had banned having pipers play on battle fronts—too many of them had been killed as they played, unprotected, in an effort to rally their troops. Bill Millin, however, was ordered by his commanding officer, Lord Lovat, to play despite this ban. ***I cannot imagine how Millin must have felt as he emerged from his landing craft,*** clutching **not** his weapon, but his instrument, above the water to his chest. Millin,

reflecting on the situation later, recalled how he was in shock that he was being asked to play during this landing, with bullets flying all around him and men dying to his left and right.

**However**, since he was asked by Lovat to play, Millin gathered up his resolve and courage, and committed to doing what he could as well as he was able. For all the insanity of the situation, Millin's **preparation** and **work** had a great effect on those around him. Another soldier who reflected on the day said: *“above all, I shall never forget hearing the skirl of Bill Millin’s pipes. It is hard to describe the impact it had. It gave us a great lift and increased our determination. As well as the pride we felt, it reminded us of home and why were there fighting for our lives and those of our loved ones.”*

Millin’s preparation seems to have paid off. He did what he could to get himself ready for the situation, and he accepted that certain aspects of that day in his life were beyond his control. Ultimately, he *did* survive—we have to imagine, though, that he knew that the only thing in **his** control was to do his best and be as prepared as possible.

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In Jacob’s case, preparation was equally important for his making it through **yet another** major life change in a short time: Prepared for his encounter with God, Jacob had his new name—Israel—recognized by the Divine. He then becomes included in the covenant of his father and grandfather, and he moves forward from his encounter with Esau positively.

Jacob has one last major life-event just a few verses later, when his beloved wife Rachael dies in childbirth. As the Torah describes from verses 16-18: *They journeyed from Beth-el; and there was still some way to come to Ephrath; and Rachel travailed, and she had hard labor. And it came to pass, when she was in hard labor, that the midwife said unto her: 'Fear not; for this also is a son for thee.'* *And it came to pass, as her soul was in departing--for she died--that she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benyamin.*

An important lesson for coping with change and tragedy comes from this passage—particularly in how each of Benjamin’s parents handle naming their new son. After a difficult labor, one which she knows is leading to her death, Rachel reasonably calls her new son, Ben-oni—the *son of my suffering*. Jacob, however, gives his new son a different name: Ben-yamin. While etymology of this name is a little unclear, it’s probably a reference to the fact that Benjamin was a son of Jacob’s old age. Jacob’s name seems to indicate that his son is a blessing to him; Rachel’s name, in contrast, appears to point to her son having been a curse. From this, we ought to learn that no matter what emotions we feel as we struggle with change, they are what we might call “right.”

This reminds me of a story told to me about a boy who was nearing his bar mitzvah when a different tragedy struck—this boy’s bar mitzvah was set to occur on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001. After the events of September the 11<sup>th</sup> had unfolded, this boy approached his rabbi, unsure of what would happen or what he was supposed to do. In particular, he was confused about how he was supposed to take part in a joyous occasion when something so horrific had just occurred. The response he received was one which links to the mixture of emotions felt by Rachel and Jacob: This boy was instructed to feel whatever sadness, anger, and frustration came naturally

because of September 11<sup>th</sup>. At the same time, though, he was told not to stop himself from feeling the joy and happiness of his bar mitzvah.

As we can see from this example and from the examples of Rachael and Jacob, it is not necessary to deny one emotion in order to access others. When we experience change, it is completely normal to feel a wide range of often-conflicting emotions. There's no reason we can't hold onto anger, sadness, joy, excitement, fear, and grief, all at the same time. Especially in a situation like Jacob and Rachael's, where a loss was taking place at the same time as a *simchah*, one should only expect a complex and **seemingly**-contradictory array of emotions.

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Within the span of this single parashah, Jacob's metaphoric world takes many forms: He inhabits a family therapist's office, a synagogue, a field of slaughter, a cemetery, and a hospital to greet a newborn. Each change in Jacob's life must have taken him energy and work to overcome, with even the good changes requiring an adjustment.

Since we have the advantage of being able to read the Torah from beginning-to-end, though, we know that Jacob *did* manage to live through all the events which befell him. Similarly, if we cope well, we all have the means to rise to meet our challenges—**our changing realities**—when the need arises. It might never be easy, but we can make it possible.