



Parashat Vayishlach
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The Ring

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We were waiting for it. Hoping for it. Expecting it. For years, it was so close, and yet so far away. This week, finally, at long last, it happened. Prince William and Kate Middleton finally announced their engagement. Yes! There will be a royal wedding after all. In all the press coverage, one detail caught my attention. The ring. When Prince William proposed, he gave Kate Middleton the ring that his father, Prince Charles, had given his mother, Diana, Princess of Wales, when they had announced their engagement in 1981. This ring is bling. It is an oval sapphire surrounded by diamonds. But the ring is more than bling. As I have been thinking about this ring, three truths emerge from it that transcend its royal origins and apply to us all.

Lady Di tragically died in the full bloom of her life, at the age of 36, in 1997. When she died, her ring was put away, in a sack, out of the sun, out of life, out of circulation, out of joy. There must have been times in the 14 years since Lady Di was killed that it seemed that ring would never see the light of day, and would never be worn in joy, again.

That happens to us all. At some point, every one of us will enter a winter of discontent when it seems the sun will never shine, and we will never feel joy, again. We are beset with an illness. Or a loved one dies. We lose a job and can't find another one. We have a financial reversal. A dream we have been pursuing does not pan out. We go to sleep thinking about our pain. We wake up thinking about our pain. And it feels like we will never get out of that cycle.

It is for such moments that the psalmist tells us *ba'erev yalin bechi v'laboker rinah*. There will be a night of tears. But that night will not last forever. In the morning there will be

joy. Sometimes that night is long. Too long. How long has it been since I felt happy? Too long. How long has it been since I felt carefree? Too long. How long has it been since I was unafraid? Too long. How long has it been since I have last felt a gentle touch? Too long. But the psalmist is telling us. I know it's long. I know it's too long. But hang on. Have faith. Have patience. Have a long-run view. One day, one year, that ring will come out of the sack, and you will wear it again.

The story is told of King Solomon, known far and wide for his wisdom, that once he was challenged to think of something that, when the happy person looks at it, he becomes sad, and when the sad person looks at it, he becomes happy. After deliberating for some time, the King commissioned a jeweler in the Kingdom to make a ring, and on that ring to engrave three Hebrew letters: *gimel*, *zayin*, *yad*, which stands for *gam zeh ya'avur*. This too shall pass.

That it is resilient human nature to emerge from even the darkest spot was the theme of a powerful sermon once delivered by Rabbi Harold Kushner. Rabbi Kushner, as you may remember, and his wife Suzette, had a son named Aaron who was diagnosed at an early age with a congenital terminal disease called progeria, which causes advanced aging. Aaron would eventually succumb to this disease as a teen ager, an unimaginable loss that Rabbi Kushner treated in his classic book When Bad Things Happen to Good People. Aaron was still alive, and his parents were still with him in his illness, when his younger sister Ariel celebrated her Bat Mitzvah. At that Bat Mitzvah, Rabbi Kushner observed:

If you live long enough, if you care deeply enough, there will come a time when you will face...a crisis of adult spiritual life. You'll get hurt. Something will come along and take away the things, the people that make your life worthwhile, and you'll wonder if you'll ever be able to be happy again... "Where is there joy?" you will ask... In the words of Kahlil Gibran, you will turn your back on the sun, and the sun will become for you nothing more than a caster of shadows.

And [then with the passage of time] miraculously, inexorably, the goodness of life

will reassert itself. And the man who said he would never laugh again, will laugh; and the woman who insisted she had nothing left to live for, will find new reasons to get up in the morning and look forward to the day; and the house which had grown dark and still will echo once more with the sounds of celebration.

So too here, the ring removed in mourning, the ring recovered from tragedy, 14 years later is now worn again in joy.

And not just in joy. The ring is a tangible reminder of Lady Di's continued presence in her children's lives. What does it mean when we say of a loved one, a parent or grandparent who has passed on, that they are "with" us? What does "with" us mean?

A couple of weeks ago, Arnold Eisen, the Chancellor of JTS, engaged just this question when he talked about one biblical word that we encounter several times in Genesis, *toldot*. *Toldot* has two meanings. It means generations, ancestors and descendants. And it means story. The Torah says *eleh toldot Avraham Yitzchak*, which means, the Chancellor observed, that Abraham's story *is* Isaac. The Torah also says *eleh toldot Yaakov Yosef*, Jacob's story *is* Joseph. When we are alive, our life, our heart, *is* our children. We are never happier than our least happy child. And when we pass, our life continues *through* our children.

Sometimes that continuity is conveyed, symbolically, by things: things like a tallit that a grandfather once wore, or a siddur that an ancestor once prayed with, or candle sticks that a grandmother once lit to bring in Shabbat, or china that once adorned the dinner table of our youth. Papa and Nana might be gone, the Thanksgiving feast of our childhood might now be only a distant memory, but the tallit, the candle sticks, the fine dishes, like Lady Di's wedding ring, testify to love and memory and commitment that will never die. That is why Song of Songs famously teaches that love is *as strong as* death. It is a sober, realistic teaching. It doesn't say love is *stronger* than death. Death is real and not to be denied. But if love is *as strong* as death, then, through the power of our memory and our deeds, we have the last word.

But of course the ring is not only a reflection of the past, it is also a statement of Prince William and Kate Middleton's future. And what statement does it make? The Talmud teaches that if two people love one another, they can live on the head of a pin in peace and happiness. And if two people do not love one another, the largest mansion is not big enough.

The story is told that when Charles and Diana were interviewed after their engagement, a reporter asked if they were in love. Lady Di enthusiastically affirmed: "Of course." But Charles caustically retorted: "Whatever love is."

Our tradition has something to say about that. Love is of course an emotion reflected in the ecstasy of the moment when one person, offering a ring, says to another will you marry me, and the other says yes. But love is also more than an emotion. Love is what we do every day that renews the emotion. I was recently at the family gathering, the *vidui*, of a matriarch who was close to being called by God to be with God. Her children were offering up last words of love and tribute to her. She and her husband had had the most loving marriage for more than 50 years. But at the end of the line, what did the children point to? What did they remember? They remembered the Boston Globe. Their parents got the Boston Globe every day. As Globe subscribers know, the Globe has coupons and other advertisements. He did not like getting the coupons and advertisements. He just wanted the newspaper. Every day, for 50 years, she would get the Globe, take it out of the plastic, remove the offending coupons and advertisements, and only then present it to her appreciative husband. Little kindnesses, daily renewed.

The wedding ring, which betokens that core primal moment of *falling* in love, also imports the daily labor of *staying* in love. In the third paragraph of the *shemah*, which we say twice a day, we say of our tzitzit, the fringes, *u'ritem oto uzechartem et kol mitzvot adonai va'asitem otam*, we see them, we remember our core commitments, and we do deeds that renew.

Seeing, remembering, doing, renewing, every day. That will need to be as true for Prince William and Kate Middleton as it is for every one of us who is married.

Yes, the news of the day is filled with headlines about royal weddings and national nuptials, but beneath the hype are fundamental truths and prayers.

May we have the faith that when the night has been long, too long, dark, too dark, the ring we once put away, hidden in some sack, far from light, far from joy, we will one day wear again. For tears dwell at night, but joy will come in the morning.

May we carry our departed loved ones with us, for love is as strong as death, and their story is now our story, and they now live on in and through us.

May a moment of exaltation, at an engagement, under a chuppah, ripen into a lifetime of labors of love to be lived out in home and hearth. After all, putting on the wedding ring, getting married, is easy. Heeding the wedding ring, renewing the love, staying married, is where the real meaning is to be found. And that takes a lifetime. Shabbat shalom.