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**Beth Chayim Chadashim, LA**

**Parashat Vayishlach**

**World AIDS Day 2001, Nov. 30, 2001**

I spoke this morning to my Aunt Bege, my mom's oldest living sister. She'll be 94 tomorrow. We've been talking on the phone a lot lately, more than we used to, since my mom died. "I feel very lonely," she said this morning. "I suppose it will go away, but I don't really want it to." We agreed the loss of my mom/her sister leaves a hole in us that neither of us really wants to fill. My aunt Bege has yet one more sister still alive – they were once a family of six siblings. It is good, certainly, that Bege and Harriet still have each other – a friendship that is 92 years old – can you imagine? – but as far as it being a soother of the loss they feel at the death of their sister Claire . . . it isn't really, I guess. This was a family of 6 siblings all of whom were dear friends all of their lives. No family feuds intruded; only one of them ever even moved away from Chicago, and she still saw them at least once a year their whole lives, and talked often, and wrote letters, and sometimes vacationed together – even sharing homes with siblings and their spouses for weeks at a time.

It was similar with my dad and his 3 brothers -- though my dad was the one to move away from their hometown -- all of them remained good friends all of their lives, and 3 of the 4 of them lived long lives.

These are my role models for sibling relationships. That my brother and I get along so well and always have was just a given in my family. I sometimes forget that it isn't the case for all siblings. For a lot of people, I know, it's not my parents' families, but the heart-rending families we find in the Book of Genesis, that mirror their own family life. That's why, I suppose, Torah gives us those stories – the ones of parents playing favorites, and siblings feuding, and in-laws bickering, and on and on – in part so that we know we're not alone, not the only ones who have a hard time, and in part so that we might learn how to cope, how to grow into good sibling relationships even if we're unlucky enough to have a rocky start. For change does happen in Torah. Not always in every relationship, but as we go along, people learn, people change. In the first bad sibling rivalry – Cain kills Abel. But that doesn't happen again. In the next challenging sibling relationship – Isaac and Ishmael – they part company at a young age, but as far as we know they are not themselves enemies, and they come together to bury their father Abraham. The next generation brings the next troubled siblings – Jacob and Esau – but in this week's Torah portion, we take hope in their willingness to take hope.

For in this week's Torah portion, Vayishlach, we read of a family feud reconciled long before the death of a parent brings them to the same place at the same time. After 20 years of separation, Jacob returns to his homeland to meet up with his brother Esau. No guarantee here to be sure – when last Jacob saw or heard from Esau – 20 years ago – Jacob had to

flee from home because Esau was so mad at him he was threatening to kill him. These twin brothers began fighting with one another while still in their mother's womb – what hope could there be? Jacob, who didn't learn from his father about sibling relationships, didn't learn it from his wives either – those sisters, Rachel and Leah, struggled with one another throughout their marriages to Jacob. Of course their father, Laban, just like Jacob and Esau's parents, did all they could to fuel those sibling rivalries.

Although Jacob and Esau, also in this week's portion, do come together to bury their father Isaac, they actually reconcile well before that moment. How do they manage it? It's not entirely clear – it's one of Torah's most ambiguous and most powerful stories. I think it's so ambiguous because it is so like real life – where we're often not quite sure what just happened, what changed to make change possible for us, to make us feel differently than we felt twenty years ago, or twenty minutes ago, for that matter. What did it take for Jacob and Esau to get over past tensions? Do they in fact get over them, or do they decide just to move on? Maybe our varied readings of the story depend upon our own relationships with siblings and relatives and friends. Even though some commentators convincingly argue that both Esau and Jacob have hidden motives in this story, or that double meanings appear in it, I still tend to take their actions and their words at face value – this year anyway. [an aside: even though Jacob asks Esau to accept a gift, a "blessing" as he calls it [33:11], from him. And Esau reluctantly agrees. Some commentators convincingly read this as Jacob's reparation for the blessings he had stolen from Esau years before.]

For I'm just not willing to give up, I guess, that touching scene of reconciliation, captured in one verse, the Torah study group's verse of the week: "And Esau ran to greet Jacob, and embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him, and they wept." [33:4]. Some commentators question Esau's sincerity. The printed texts of the Torah even have an odd set of dots over the word va-yisha-kay-hu – and he kissed him, which some commentators say is meant to signal to us that something is wrong here – perhaps there is even a word play, say some, on the similar sounding word "bite." Esau meant not to kiss, but to bite his brother when he saw him again. But this year anyway, I'm going not with those skeptics, I'm going with Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai (2nd century CE) who saw in the peculiar dots over va-yisha-kay-hu not a warning but a glittering message of hope, saying, the dots are meant to alert us so that we will notice this -- that "an enemy can turn into a friend given the right circumstances" [see ftnt 44 p.377 of This is the Torah]. Hm, "given the right circumstances..."

Sadly, we never know when we might be asked to come together to bury a parent or a sibling, a friend . . . or a former friend. Wouldn't it be nice if we could bury the hatchet before we have to bury the person? In this challenging time of terror and war, on this eve of yet another World AIDS Day when we ask the world to remember what we still know on a daily basis – that AIDS still challenges us: changing our lives, threatening our lives, still taking some of our lives prematurely. If nothing else, don't these threats alone give us the "right circumstances" – can we afford to wait? – Given the right circumstances, an enemy can turn into a friend, said Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai. Given the right circumstances, a brother . . . or a sister . . . can turn into a friend.

Shabbat shalom