Adaptation
By Rabbi Barry Freundel

One of the great mixed blessings of human nature is our capacity to adapt and accept a wide variety of circumstances and conditions in our lives. In many ways, this is good, for it allows humanity to adjust to different realities while opening our potential for creativity and progress in any situation in which we find ourselves. Nonetheless, there is a danger to this human capacity for adaptation, a danger expressed in the Bible in three stories superficially similar, but dramatically and significantly different in detail. Each centers around a well, an oasis in the desert. First, a bit of background. Three of our most important Biblical role models began their relationships with their eventual spouses at a well. This is the superficial similarity. However, it is the details of the three stories that stand out if we read the Bible carefully.

Isaac, Abraham's son, is the first for whom an encounter at a well defined his life's partner. Actually, Isaac was not physically present at the well, but Eliezer, his father's servant, was. Sent by Abraham, his master, to find a wife for Isaac, and not knowing how to proceed or whom to choose, Eliezer prayed:

And he said, O Lord God of my master Abraham, I beseech you, send me good speed this day, and show kindness to my master Abraham. Behold, I stand here by the well of water; and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water; And let it come to pass, that the girl to whom I shall say, Let down your water jar, I beg you, that I may drink; and she shall say, Drink, and I will give your camels drink also; let the same be she whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac; and thereby shall I know that you have shown kindness to my master. (Genesis 24:12-14)
The prayer is answered.

And it came to pass, before he had finished speaking, that, behold, Rebekah came out, who was born to Bethuel, son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, with her water jar upon her shoulder... And the girl was very pretty to look upon, a virgin, and no man had known her; and she went down to the well, and filled her water jar, and came up. And the servant ran to meet her, and said, Let me, I beg you, drink a little water from your water jar. And she said, Drink, my lord; and she hurried, and let down her water jar upon her hand, and gave him drink. And when she had finished giving him drink, she said, I will draw water for your camels also, until they have finished drinking. And she hurried, and emptied her water jar into the trough, and ran back to the well to draw water, and drew for all his camels. (Genesis 24:15-20)
The story is remarkable for the servant's prayer, for G-d's response, and for the personal characteristics of the young woman, Rebecca. It is entirely unremarkable for its description of the well. The well is a source of water, people come to it to draw water, and people and their animals drink. G-d appears to be in His heaven and all appears to be right with His world.
A generation later, Isaac's son Jacob came to this well. Escaping the wrath of his brother, Esau, and following the instructions of his mother and his father, Jacob came to the well, presumably with some idea of finding a wife. He did so. He found Rachel, who became the most beloved of his wives. But the well that he found was very different than the one which Eliezer encountered.

Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the people of the east. And he looked, and saw a well in the field, and, lo, there were three flocks of sheep lying by it; for from that well they watered the flocks; and a great stone was upon the well's mouth. And there were all the flocks gathered; and they rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the sheep, and put the stone again upon the well's mouth in his place. (Genesis 29:1-3)

This stone on the well indicates that things had deteriorated within the society. One puts a stone on a well to prevent either theft of the water (which indicates a far less generous society than in Eliezer's time) or, more likely, in an attempt to prevent someone from fouling or poisoning the well. In early Biblical times, such actions would constitute acts of terrorism. The presence of the stone, therefore, indicates a deterioration in societal conditions, no matter how one understands its purpose. In parallel to our contemporary situation in dealing with terrorism, the presence of the stone is not without its economic costs. Jacob points this out.

And he said, Behold, it is yet high day, nor is it time that the cattle should be gathered together; water the sheep, and go and feed them. (Genesis 29:7)
The shepherds explain,

And they said, We can not, until all the flocks are gathered together, and till they roll the stone from the well's mouth; then we will water the sheep. (Genesis 29:8)
In these words, we find embodied the types of economic impact and concerns that our modern response to terrorism embodies. Requiring people to check in at airports two hours before a flight damages their productivity, but it may be necessary to maintain safety.

In the face of this reality, Jacob acted,

And while he still spoke with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she kept them. And it came to pass, when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, that Jacob went near, and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother. (Genesis 29:8)

For a moment, at least, the well was again accessible.

The third "well" story is the most remarkable of all. Moses, while escaping from Pharaoh and Egypt after having protected a Jewish slave from an Egyptian taskmaster who was
beating him, happens upon a well. He encounters an act of blatant harassment and assault. Once again, Moses acts to help the weaker and the unprotected.

...But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well. And the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. And the shepherds came and drove them away; but Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flock. (Exodus 2:15-17)

This story is painful enough, but the next part of the story is even more difficult. The young women who Moses saves return home, and the following dialogue ensues between them and their father,

And when they came to Reuel their father, he said, How is it that you have come so soon today? And they said, An Egyptian delivered us from the hand of the shepherds, and also drew enough water for us, and watered the flock. (Exodus 2:15-17)

How sad! How tragic that a society has fallen this far. The young women came home early because their normal daily experience has been interrupted. What was this normal experience? It was the shepherds harassing and assaulting them.

This was so much part of their daily experience that their return home was scheduled to allow time for this daily degradation. It is not a stretch to say that this family ate dinner at 6:30 rather than at 6:00 to allow time for the shepherds to have their fun. Presumably, as the flocks needed watering, and as there was no one but the daughters to do the job, the family needed to tolerate this outrage to survive. Sadly, no one in the society stepped forward to intervene until Moses came along. Presumably, when Moses married one of the daughters and took over the shepherding duties, the problem was solved.

Tracing the incidents at the well from Eliezer to Jacob to Moses takes us through societal decline. More than that, it takes us through the danger of human adaptability to that which should be unacceptable. The shepherds in Jacob's time accept the stone on the well despite its negative economic impact and societal meaning. The young women in Moses' time accept the degradation despite its psychological and physical impact. Only Jacob and Moses, as outsiders, see that these conditions are unacceptable, and act dramatically to change them.

The human condition requires us on occasion to accept difficult things temporarily. Our adaptability allows us to do so, and that is a Divine gift. We must always be on guard, however, against accepting such things permanently and not acting to make things better.