



*Parshat Bereshit*  
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**The Five Books of Moses, The Five Stages of Life,  
The Five Pieces of Work We Always Need to be Working On**  
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My father in love, Rabbi Arnold Goodman, once observed that the Five Books of Moses, that we begin reading again today, represent five stages of life that all of us go through.

Genesis is about our family of origin—our relationships with our parents, brothers, sisters, and grandparents.

Exodus is about the commitments that we make as an adult. In Genesis we are born into these commitments. In Exodus, we create them on our own. The Israelites stand at Sinai and enter into their covenant with God. What kinds of life-long commitments do *we* make as adults?

Leviticus is about two things. The first is having *avodat kodesh*, some kind of sacred work, like the priests who offered up sacrifices in the tabernacle. The second is about having an ethical compass. *Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh ani Adonai eloheichem*, be holy for I the Lord your God am holy. Be kind to the widow, orphan and stranger. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Numbers, in Hebrew *Bamidbar*, is better translated as In the Wilderness, which is both what *Bamidbar* actually means, and what the book is about. *Bamidbar* is about our mid-life and late-life challenges that come in so many forms. The challenge of loss, of losing ones we love. The Israelites lose both Aaron and Miriam. The challenge of accepting and living with our own mortality. Moses learns that he is not crossing the River Jordan, that he is going to die on the wrong side of the River Jordan. The challenge of not having enough of what we want, and of rebelling over this fact. The Israelites constantly complain that they don't have enough water, they don't have enough food. The challenge of ennui and boredom, where every grain of sand

looks like the next grain of sand. Where every week trekking through the endless wilderness feels like the week that was and the week that will be. All of which leads to the existential question of *Bamidbar* that both Moses and the Israelites ask: Is *this* all there is? Is *this* it? Is *this* my life? Moses is so despondent about this question that he is the first person in the Torah to say, in Numbers 11:15, kill me now. I cannot take this anymore.

Assuming we can survive the assaults, losses and indignities of the wilderness, then in the Book of Deuteronomy we get to think about the kind of legacy we leave behind. Moses knows he is dying, but he also knows that he stands for spiritual values that will live on in his descendants.

Each of these five books leaves us with spiritual homework.

Genesis asks us to think about: are we good with our family of origin? Are we good with our mother, father and grandparents? Are we good with our brothers and sisters? If not, what tweaks do we need to make to get good?

Exodus asks us to think about: Have we made covenantal commitments as adults—to our spouse, to our children, to ideals and values we believe in—and have we made good on those commitments? How can we step up our covenantal game?

Leviticus asks us to think about the work of our life, our *avodat kodesh*. The priests offered sacrifices for all of Israel. What do we do, and who do we help? And how is our ethical compass going? Are we doing our work, and our life, with our ethical compass intact?

In the Wilderness, *Bamidbar*, asks us to think about how we are weathering the storms, the losses, the pain of life. When each grain of sand feels like the next, when each week feels like the next, when the accumulated weight of our losses and dissatisfactions begin to feel overwhelming, how do we get out of our wilderness?

And Deuteronomy invites us to think about how the lessons of our life, and our noblest values, can live on as our enduring legacy. Moses gave great speeches. What will we do, who will hear about what we do, who will care about what we do, who will carry on our life's work?

Those are the Five Books of Moses. Those are the the Five Stages of life. Those are five pieces of spiritual homework. As we think about that homework, remember two things.

The first is that we are never done with any phase. It's not like school, where we graduate from high school, leave high school, and go off to college. We always have work in all five of the books, usually at the same time. We are working on our family of origin, we are working on the family we have created, we are working on our work and on our ethical compass, we are working through the wilderness, we are working on *being* a worthy legacy—all at the same time. Most of us will have five balls up in the air throughout our lives.

The second is that nobody goes through life unscathed. Nobody gets to skip Bamidbar. We would all love to move from the sacred work and ethical compass of Leviticus straight to leaving our legacy of Deuteronomy, and bypass the wilderness altogether. But everybody has to spend their time in the wilderness. A key question for all of us is, do we have enough resilience and strength to survive and thrive?

How should we be thinking about all the important work we still have to do?

A speaker named Drew Dudley gave a Ted talk in which he tells the story of a woman who, along with Drew Dudley, went to Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, Canada. He is four years older than she. He was a senior when she was a freshman. She says to him: I have to tell you a story about what happened to me four years ago, the morning that freshmen registered. I was a very nervous freshman. My parents had brought me to school. The previous night in the hotel, I had a total melt-down. I told my parents I was not ready for college, I did not

want to go to college, I wanted to go home. My parents said listen, we came all the way to New Brunswick, why don't we just go and register, see the campus, see other students. If after that you decide you really don't want to go, we will take you home. It will be your call. But at least try before deciding it's not for you.

The next morning I am at registration, and it feels all wrong. It feels overwhelming. I am just about to melt down again and tell my parents that I want to go back home. Just then, you walk out of the Student Union Building with a goofy hat, and a basket full of lollipops, trying to spread good cheer among the students. You see me having a meltdown. You also see another student, a guy, minding his own business, standing next to me. You go over to him and say, "Hey, why don't you give a lollipop to that beautiful woman standing next to you." The guy is very sheepish. It is awkward. He doesn't know what to do. But he gives me a lollipop. Just then you take one look at my parents and say: "Your daughter is out of your house for one day, and already she is taking candy from perfect strangers." The people in our vicinity started laughing, and for the first time, I felt that I was in the right place. I was going to be okay. I was home. You, and your wacky lollipop, made all the difference. By the way, one other thing you should know is that boy who gave me the lollipop and I have been going out for four years.

A year and a half later, Drew Dudley gets an invitation to their wedding.

And here is what Drew Dudley describes as the kicker. He has no memory of the encounter. He gave lots of students lollipops that day. He does not remember the frightened girl and the sheepish boy. This encounter made all the difference in the world to her, and to her boyfriend, and now husband, and Drew Dudley could not even remember it.

Drew Dudley's point, in his speech called Everyday Leadership, is that every day kindnesses to people, what he calls lollipop moments, make all the difference in the world. We

can change somebody's day, we can change somebody's life, by doing ordinary kindnesses on an ordinary day that have extraordinary impact.

What does this story mean for us as we think about our own five books? We might think that with five balls in the air, the focus of our life should be ourselves.

But the truth is that other people are going through their versions of the five books. Here this woman was stuck in Genesis, not yet ready for Exodus, not yet ready to make her own covenantal commitments. Drew Dudley saw and cared. He paid heed. On an ordinary day, doing an ordinary thing, giving out a lollipop, he changed her life.

We can all do that. The best way to help ourselves is not to obsess about ourselves. The best way to help ourselves is to help somebody else. Shabbat shalom.