

**Working for Connections**  
**Rabbi David Lerner**  
**Bereisheet 5781**

As a kid, I loved to get free things.

Well, who doesn't?

But, I was particularly obsessed.

Anytime there was an offer for something free, I was getting it. If a store said "FREE" in the window, I was going in to get that, whatever it was. Yes, often I walked out with a sampler of woman's perfume, but those are the breaks.

And so I was cutting out cereal box tops and sending in my 25 cents for shipping and handling to get almost anything. Sometimes it was something cool like a Tony the Tiger baseball – they're grrrrreat!

Or a Mike Piazza baseball. I still have that one!

Sometimes, it was something silly like a Hot Wheels car holder. I did not really understand that one. I remember looking at it and wondering why I had bothered cutting out all those box tops...



Perhaps it was that although my family had everything we needed, we did not have as much as others. We were the only one-car family that I knew in the suburbs.

Once I switched in 7th grade to a private Jewish school on Manhattan's Upper East Side, where some of the students lived in duplexes on Fifth Avenue or penthouses on Park Avenue, I really felt different, so I guess I really wanted to accumulate things.

And so I worked at it.

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This morning we began the cycle of the Torah reading anew with *Parashat B'reisheet*.

Everything begins smoothly for people – we are the pinnacle of Creation – the last creatures created before God rests. We are told to be fertile and enjoy ourselves.

Wow - what a gift - and that's just chapter one!

We can see why God calls it *tov me'od* – very good!

In chapter two, the Second Creation narrative, things are also pretty good. The first human being is living in the Garden of Eden – there are trees, a river, a land called *Havilah* filled with gold, bdellium, and lapis

lazuli. Except for one measly tree that you are not supposed to eat from, everything is great.

And God notices that this first human being is a bit lonely, so that's quickly rectified with some Divine out-patient, same-day surgery that allows two people to be created out of one.

No anesthesia required.

Everything is pretty easy.

Everything comes for free.

You don't even have to cut out any cereal box tops.

But then, everything changes. The first couple eats from the forbidden tree and Easy Street is over. The free pass comes to an end.

God banishes the couple from the Garden to "till the soil from which he was taken." (Genesis 3:23)

But listen to the punishment that Adam is given: "*Arura ha-adamah ba'averekha b'etzavon tokhalenah kol yemei hayeikha* - cursed be the ground because of you; by toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life: thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. But your food shall be the grasses of the field; By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat, until you



return to the ground - for from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:17-19)

Through a historical reading, we can see this passage as explaining [the transition from hunter-gatherers to farmers](#) or as [the consolidation to larger and larger farming societies](#) which was still taking place 4,000 years ago that the Torah is describing, and one can feel the bittersweet sense of missing something, the longing for a simpler, easier life.

But, today, I want to offer a slightly different reading of this text.

Perhaps it is not such a bad thing to have to work.

In the punishment offered to Eve before this, she is told she will suffer pain in childbirth. And thus, both the man and the woman will both endure suffering - for the man, in his back-breaking work in the fields and for the woman, in child-birth, which until recently, was not only painful, but also quite dangerous.

As Rabbi Harold Kushner notes: we do not need to see these pronouncements as punishments, but “as the consequences of acquiring a knowledge of good and evil, which makes a human life infinitely more complicated than the life of a beast. Food and mating are relatively straight-

forward for animals, but work and sexuality can be terribly painful -- and profoundly gratifying -- for humans.”

In fact, Judaism sets up a system where we must work even if we are independently



wealthy. Take a look at the *mitzvah* of Shabbat for example. In Exodus, the Torah states that before you should rest: “*Sheshet yamim ta’avod* - for six days you MUST work.” It’s not optional, you have to work. Find a job; volunteer; make phone calls reminding people to vote; do something. Labor is part and parcel of the experience of being a human being.

All of which brings me to this moment. We are a good seven months into the pandemic and from the looks of it, this will be going on for a while - probably pretty intensely through the winter and spring and even then, it may be another 6+ months where things will still be challenging.

As cases are rising again and the weather is getting colder and wetter, things will get particularly challenging. It will be harder for us to come together in person, even with all our safety protocols.

And if cases rise even more, that will make things only worse. We will not be able to see each other, to gather on our front lawns or back decks. It will be a long winter.

While that book, [The Long Winter by Laura Ingalls Wilder](#) is my favorite of her Little House on the Prairie series, it is also the gloomiest and I am thinking along those lines.

So, what are we to do?

Like Adam and Eve expelled from the Garden, we must try not to despair, but to reframe our situation.

Yes, it is hard.

Yes, this is challenging.

Yes, it will be work.

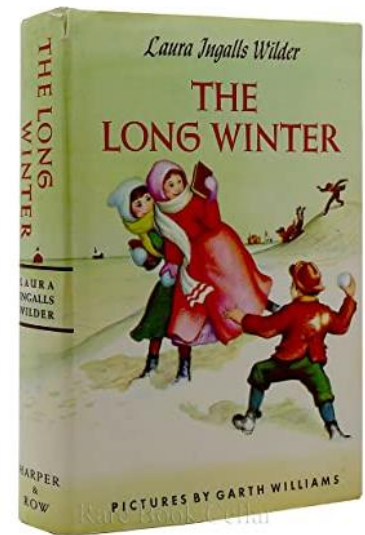
But, we can do this.

It will take an additional effort; it may even take some sweat of our brow type of effort.

How, you might ask?

Well, first, show up on Zoom.

Yeah, you can do it - pick some *minyanim*, some classes, yoga, a meditation, a schmooze, and show up.



Turn on your camera. If we cannot see you, it's really hard to connect with you!

Turn off your phone and any other distractions - try to be truly present!

Say something - that makes a big difference.

And now, here's the game-changer - call up someone.

Someone you know a little bit, but not too well. We all call our friends and that's great.

But shul works by speaking with people we know a little bit, and then speaking with them more at kiddush, or in the hallway or after *minyan* in the lobby.

But now, there is no kiddush.

There is no hallway.

There is no lobby.

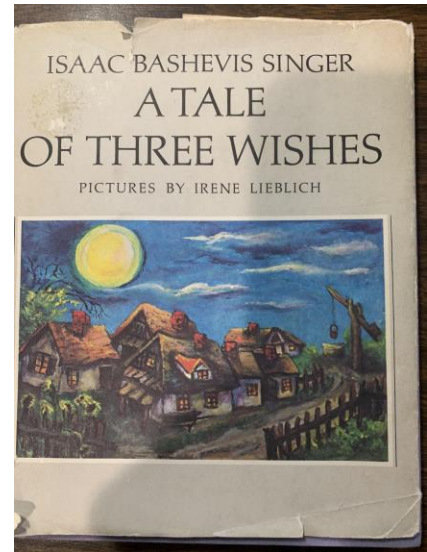
So, pick up the phone and call someone - someone you know a little, but not that well.

I know, I know, it can be awkward and hard and that's not fun. But no one said this pandemic was going to be all fun. And in this case, it's actually going to be worth it.

You will come away from that call with a new connection, a new *haver*, a new friend.

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Each year on Sukkot, I tell the same story to our 3rd-6th graders: [Isaac Bashevis Singer's Tale of Three Wishes](#). It's my favorite children's story. It's about the last day of Sukkot, *Hoshanah Rabbah*, and three little children who are told that on the last night of Sukkot, which is called *Hoshanah Rabbah*, the Heavens open and you



can wish for anything and it comes true. The children wish to become learned, smart, wise, and dedicated to the Jewish people, but they learn that you cannot just wish for things, you need to work for them.

Singer ends his story with this line: “For those who are willing to make an effort, great miracles and wonderful treasures are in store. For them, the gates of heaven are always open.”

So don't bother collecting any box tops, but jump on Zooms and pick up the phone and connect over this long winter.

It will warm us all up!

Shabbat Shalom.