

“Social Decency”
Rosh haShanah Morning Sermon 5774-2013
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In human years, our dog, Lani, is going to be 98 years old in January. Of course, in dog years she'll be 14 years...young. I love the way dogs, in our perception, are both young and old simultaneously. At a recent dinner at our home, Toby made a wonderful appetizer, a hummus pizza: pizza dough, hummus, cucumbers and feta cheese. Delicious. When the dinner moved outside, we moved the platter of appetizers to a higher table which we assumed Lani could not reach because of her old age. Wrong; apparently Lani thought the hummus pizza was delicious, too. When we discovered that Lani treated herself to the pizza, I found her lying right next to the table where she “did the deed” with a huge smile across her hummus covered face. We looked at each other. She didn't move. I attributed that to her being 98. However, in that one glance she said otherwise. “You know, I've been around the block with you (literally!) enough to know that you'll take me around the block again tonight and then you'll feed me in the morning no matter what I've done. It's simple: when you guys were here earlier, eating that yummy stuff from that lower table over there, every time I got close you told me 'no!' in that firm but friendly way of yours. Then when you weren't around to tell me not to, I ate it and it was very good! You look at me and see that I'm getting old. At the same time you still think of me as a cute little puppy and, in a lot of ways I am. That puppy-ness is what motivated me to be able to reach the table and eat that yummy, creamy, doughy, wet and crunchy stuff which you think smelled good to you – you have no idea what smells really are, buddy! So, bottom line I am young enough to do it and old enough not to need to scamper away like I did when I was a puppy.” I just looked at her and laughed. I love her combination of youthful bravado and life-wisdom.

I think of Beth Shir Shalom the same way. We have been a community for over 22 years now. We've been around the block with one another in various ways for and through life's many changes and fortunes

and that give us a wisdom for dealing with the day-to-day that only is garnered through living those experiences. At the same time, we are constantly infused with newness, especially from the families and kids in our ECC and JELLI (the new name for our religious school). Still, not all of our newness comes from our younger and youngest members. People join the community at various ages and they bring their unique perspectives and ideas of growth and embrace to the table. That creates amazing possibilities and, something I experienced when I first began my career as a congregational rabbi: when people step up with love and respect for the community to say, “yes”, it is a constant wonderment for which I am so grateful.

To be and maintain ourselves as a community, stepping-up to contribute and participate should always be accompanied by communal grace. Our tradition calls this “*derech erez*”. The phrase “*derech erez*” literally means the “way of the land” or “the way of the world.” *Derech erez* is something that we Jews see as inherent in our culture; it is “how a Jew behaves”. For instance, we use our historic memory of *derech erez* when judge whether a given situation or public person’s behavior is “good for the Jews or bad for the Jews?” Usually the emphasis is on the latter: witness, Jack Abramoff, Bernie Madoff, Anthony Weiner, Eliot Spitzer and others. While not all of these people are practicing Jews, nonetheless, somewhere down in our *kishkes*, it hurts when we see “Jews behaving badly” in such an international, public way.

So much for the negative side of *derech erez*. The positive approach to *derech erez* is more comfortable and serves to refresh and bolster our feelings about Jewish tradition because it is nothing less than a system of fulfilling our basic responsibility to be a human being, a *mentsch*. The duty of *derech erez* is so important that my ancient colleagues imagine it coming into existence twenty-six generations before the giving of the torah, at the moment when the first human beings were expelled from the Garden of Eden. In fact, they see *derech erez*, a self-engendered system of highly-principled, decent, behavior, as creating the path that brings us to the torah, to the 613 commandments. In other words, unless we have *derech erez* as a regulator on our behavior from within, until we feel obligated to

act decently on our own, we won't be open to feeling commanded by the mandates inherent in the creation all around us.

Like the basic truths in America's declaration of independence, the truths of *derech erez* are considered to be "self-evident". Atheists and agnostics rejoice: Jewish tradition doesn't need a command from god to help explain or underscore values and behaviors that are apparent or should be apparent to anyone who is a human. No divine commandment. Just the value. "no brainers." The truths of *derech erez* are "heart-and-soulers". Here are a couple:

- In *exodus rabbah*, the large compendium of commentary spring-boarding off the book of exodus, we are told that Jews don't build their houses from wood that came from fruit trees.
- An appendix to the talmud, actually called *derech erez rabbah*, mentions fruit trees as well but in a much more urgent manner: "on account of the following four things the eclipse of both the sun and the moon occurs: those who write defamatory reports about others, giving false testimony, slaughtering and consuming nursing calves, and destroying fruit-bearing trees."
- Here's another great one from *derech erez rabbah*: "one shall not rejoice among those who are weeping, neither shall anyone weep among those who rejoice; one shall not be awake among those who are asleep, nor sleep among those who are awake; one shall not be standing among those who are seated, nor be seated among those who are standing. This is the rule: one shall not have different manners from those of his/her friends and of people in general among whom s/he is."

Perhaps it was Hillel the Elder who framed the whole concept of *derech erez* in the most grand and overarching way when he said: "what is hateful to you, do not do to your friend." "That", he said, "is the whole torah. The remainder is commentary..." that is to say, the basic nugget of being human and of being Jewish is self-awareness – not merely for the sake of self-preservation or self-betterment but rather so that we are most sensitive to the needs of others.

In that light we might understand *derech erez* as “common decency” or “benevolence”. We often confuse benevolence with charity. In a beautiful article on benevolence, rabbi Louis Jacobs, the late great leader of conservative Judaism in the united kingdom, demonstrates how “benevolence” is different and superior to “charity” by quoting the talmud: “charity can only be carried out by giving money, whereas benevolence involves giving of one’s person, for example by a kindly word or a pat on the shoulder or by generally offering words of comfort and consolation. Charity is directed to the poor, whereas benevolence involves the expression of goodwill to all, rich or poor, healthy or sick, to the successful as well as to those who fall short of success...”

as we go about the sacred labor of forming and reforming ourselves into our beth shir shalom community, there is nothing more important than keeping ourselves continually predisposed to being benevolent, to being decent, to being kind, to **not** doing to someone else anything that would be hateful to ourselves. We should give *derech erez* the highest priority in our community values, placing it twenty-six generations before everything, even before the study of torah, even before calling ourselves a **Jewish** community. **Judaism itself** demands that in order to be a **Jewish** community we must **first** be a **humane** community.

In a recent letter to me, our temple president, Mark Litvack, used these qualities to describe how we should be with one another, in every instance, in every interaction: “honesty, communication, respect, equality and fairness.” Communally and individually, we owe each other honesty, but not honesty that is expressed in a manner that breaches the respect that each of us deserves and each of us is responsible to maintain **for** one another in order to preserve our precious trust. Communally and individually, we need to be constant and open in our communication with one another, and, again, not so constant and open that we threaten another’s privacy or integrity. We depend upon each other for our **mutual** respect. We are all involved in helping Beth Shir Shalom create the delicate balance between treating each other with equality and being fair: creating communal standards and understandings while always being cognizant of individual needs and circumstances. Perhaps mark didn’t realize at the

time, but when he used those words to describe us, he was talking about *derech eretz* and I thank him for it.

In a few moments, with the help of the cantor, the choir and some very special guests, we're going to sing some beautiful words about our interdependency. Scientists tell us that this interdependency is not something of the heart or even something that we rationally conclude. The science is clear and irrefutable; we're all really one organism, everything alive and everything inanimate. When scientists get down to studying the world on the level of sub-/atomic// particles, there are no separate entities. It's not even that we are all connected. We **are** each other in the largest sense possible. As I quoted last night from John Lennon, "I am he as you are he and you are me and we are all together." With those lyrics, as he often did, Lennon was speaking globally. Beth Shir Shalom has been doing a pretty good job of acting for the sake of the global "we". We need to do as well within our intimate, lovely, strong, fragile, simple, complex, definitive and ever-changing, ever-growing community. None of us loves and treasures beth shir shalom more than anyone else. Sometimes in expressing our love for our community we forget our obligation for *derech eretz*, to be socially decent with one another. How do we reach true *derech eretz* with one another? To paraphrase our torah portion for Yom Kippur: *derech eretz* is not hidden from us, nor is it far off. It is not in some self-help book that we might say, "let us read that book so that we will know how we should act with one another." It is not in the inspiration of a public person whom we deem to be always right and always wise. Rather, it is inside of us, deep in our hearts and in the marrow of our bones, generations before we were globally conscious, even more generations before we were nationalities, even more generations before we were Jewish, twenty-six generations before the torah, back to our basic selves – human, striving to be humane, inextricably linked to everything and everyone around us. We must live and act with *derech eretz*, with benevolence, kindness and decency. Life is too short to live otherwise.