

Rosh Hashanah 5774 – Derekh Eretz
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A man is driving in Jerusalem searching for a parking space and he can't find one and he's getting frustrated. He finally looks up at the visor – because of course that's where God lives – and he makes a deal: Dear God, if you help me find a parking space, I promise to give more *tzedakkah*, eat only kosher food, and put on my *tefillin* every morning. Just then, a lady pulls out of a space a few feet in front of him and he is so excited; he looks back up at the visor and says, "Never mind, God. I just found one."

In my article for the September Scroll, I posted a picture that NASA published back in July of earth from the vantage point of Saturn and its rings. Saturn is huge in the foreground. And in the background there is a bright, but very tiny dot, which is earth. The picture underscores the reality that we humans are but a small speck in the vast expanse of the universe. It's always good to have a little humility. But today, I want to marvel at what a gift it is that we who are so small and insignificant ... were able to take such a picture! Human beings have been granted powers that make us "מעט מאלהים" just a little less than God Himself, power to do so much to understand and change – and even improve God's vast world.

I have had a lot of conversations with members of our congregation over the years. The details are always a little different, but the questions are often the same: How can I get connected? How do I get on the path ... towards a closer connection to the synagogue, to God, to Jewish identity? A lot of times we hear a message about ritual. We preach about Shabbat and kashrut as sacred responsibilities; and there is something special about these distinctively and *uniquely* Jewish practices. But sometimes we have to remind ourselves that the rituals on their own are not enough.

The primary purpose of the *mitzvot*, according to the Talmud, is "to make us better human beings, לצרף בהן את הבריות, to refine us." Social interactions, service to the community, ethics ... these things matter.

Under the leadership of Dr. Louis Nagel, we are introducing a synagogue-wide theme this year of *derekh eretz*. *Derekh eretz* literally means "the path of the earth", but it is a technical term. In the neo-Orthodox world of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *derekh eretz* refers to worldly study – as opposed to Torah studies. And in its broadest sense, *derekh eretz* refers to values, ethical living, and civility.

Actually, I never really understood the literal meaning of "path of the earth" – until now. As Jews we are given two paths. We have ritual *mitzvot*, which link us to God on the Path of Heaven (*derekh shamayim*). And we also have ethical responsibilities towards other human beings. This is *derekh eretz*, the Path of the Earth. *Derekh eretz* is the place where, to borrow a phrase from the Talmud, heaven and earth kiss.

The 19th century Yiddishist Y.L. Peretz tells a famous story, "If Not Higher". It is said that every Friday during the month of Elul, the Rebbe of Nemirov would vanish. He was nowhere to be seen. The Hasidim of Nemirov were sure that the rebbe ascended to heaven, asking God to grant peace and blessing in the new year. But there was one *Misnaged*, a rationalist who couldn't accept such a preposterous notion – a rabbi who ascended to heaven?!?

One night the *Misnaged* sneaked into the rebbe's home, slid under the rebbe's bed, and waited. Just before dawn the rebbe got up. He put on work pants, high boots, a big hat, a coat and a wide belt. He put a rope in his pocket, tucked an ax in his belt, and left the house.

The villager followed the rebbe into the forest and watched as he chopped down a small tree, split it into logs, bundled it up with the rope, and continued walking until he reached a small, dilapidated shack. He knocked on the window, and when an old woman asked who was there, he answered, "It is I, Vassil the Peasant. I have wood to sell."

"But I'm a poor widow," the frightened woman answered. "Where will I get the money?"

"I will lend it to you," replied the rebbe. "And how will I pay you back?" "I will trust you."

The rebbe put the wood into the woman's oven, kindled the fire, and left without saying a word. And now, whenever anyone reports that the Rebbe of Nemirov has ascended to heaven, this particular *Misnaged* is sure to mutter under his breath: "Heaven? If not higher."

You know the term Tikkun Olam, Repairing the World. Its origin is in the Kaballah, a Jewish mystical teaching that before the world was created, God's Presence was everywhere. God had to contract Himself – a process called *tzimtzum* – in order to make room for the world. And when God did this, the concentrated Divine Light became so bright that it shattered the primordial vessels of perfection – what is called *shevirat ha-kelim*. God had to make a choice. Either maintain perfection or create the world. And God chose creation.

I am not a mystic and I don't want to get all "out there". But there are three essential points, which are eternal truths.

1. The world as created is imperfect.
2. Human beings have the power – and the responsibility – to perfect it.
3. Our deeds matter.

God cannot do it alone. God cannot comfort the sick alone. God cannot welcome guests or build community alone. God cannot create an ethical world alone. God needs partners who practice *derekh eretz*. We are but a small speck in a vast universe, but God is counting on us.

Think about the Creation story; after all, today is the Birthday of the World. The Torah tells us that God is all-powerful. God creates everything: heaven and earth, water and land, large animals and small ones. But something is missing: "ואדם אין לעבד את האדמה", There was no human to work the land." God needed – and needs – humanity to complete creation.

In the Torah reading for *this* Shabbat, HaAzinu, the very end of the Torah, Moses refers to God as אל אמונה, the God of faith. The Rabbis ask what it means for God to have faith. We are supposed to be the ones who have faith in God; but the Rabbis understand that God has to have faith as well. God has faith in the universe. God has faith in human beings.

That's דרך ארץ. Not necessarily "big things", but values like כבוד, honor; ענוה, humility; נדיבות, generosity; שמירת לשון, watching what we say and how we say it. Acts of kindness like הכנסת אורחים, welcoming guests; בקור חולים, visiting the sick; נחום אבלים, comforting the mourner; והדרת פני זקן, offering deference to the elderly. Ethics like איפת צדק והין צדק, honest weights and measures; לפנים, משורת הדין, going beyond the letter of the law. *Derekh eretz* is spirituality on the horizontal plane, which augments the vertical relationship we have with the divine.

A couple of weeks ago there was an incident in Jerusalem. An Arab street vendor, Haitham Azouni, was working near the Damascus Gate in the Old City on one of the last days of Ramadan – a period often marked by high tension between Jews and Arabs – and he was electrocuted. A Jewish settler Haim Atthias saw the man and rushed over to resuscitate him; and he saved his life. Haim Atthias (it's ironic that his name means Life) is politically hard core – he lives in a religious settlement east of Jerusalem and he spent time in caravans as a member of the Hilltop Youth and also living in the Arab part of Hebron. But this wasn't about politics. It wasn't about religion. At that moment he didn't see an "Arab" or an "enemy"; he saw only a human being in need of help.

The Israeli media was all over this story, and Haim explained himself: "I'm sure this is what God wants from me," he said. "It isn't about peace. I'm sure this is what God expects ... that if someone needs help, you help him. And it doesn't matter what his background is." At that moment, Haim became God's partner on the horizontal plane. His differences with this man on the vertical plane – they clearly had different views of God and religion and the sanctity of the land, but those differences didn't matter. That's *derekh erez*, the path of the earth.

Sometimes we need that reminder, especially in Washington where our atmosphere feels so divided and charged: This is one I agree with; this is one I disagree with. He is right and she is left. This is my friend; this is my enemy. But the **צלם אלהים**, the divine image is the same in friend and enemy alike. The way we treat others matters. Relationships matter.

Derekh erez means being able to see God's essence in other human beings. I keep thinking about that school receptionist in Georgia, Antoinette Tuff. A man walks into the school with a gun and everyone is scared. And this one woman talks to him and convinces him to surrender to police. And then she says to him, "I just want to tell you that I love you, though, okay?"

One of the first things we learn about Moses is how he came to the defense of a Hebrew slave who was being mistreated by an Egyptian taskmaster. He struck the Egyptian in order to save the Hebrew. But how did Moses come to identify with the Hebrews in the first place? Remember that he had been raised in the palace as an Egyptian. Nachmanides imagines that someone must have told Moses he was a Jew – maybe it was some type of putdown – and that Moses determined that he wanted to go out and see these people. He felt a kinship. He witnessed injustice. And more important, he saw the humanity in these lowly slaves, he recognized the divine image. My colleague in Israel, Rabbi Avi Novis-Deutsch, finds in this passage the essential ingredient for *derekh erez*. Moses had to see beyond himself. He had to get out of the palace. He had to witness someone else's suffering and identify with it; and what he saw changed him and changed history.

Judaism's central teaching, "Love your *neighbor* as yourself, **ואהבת לרעך כמוך**."

On a personal level, I remember when my grandmother was very sick in Jerusalem and we were in Israel on a large family trip. And honestly, not everyone in my family wanted to see her. My grandmother had been a beautiful woman but now, after 2 strokes, she was in bed; her hair wasn't done; she couldn't speak in coherent sentences; she was a shadow of her former self and it was difficult to look at her like that. But I'm so glad that I went, because in spite of her sorry health and appearance, you could still sense the divine spark. She was alive. She was my grandmother. The visits were rewarding.

So I felt fortunate this past year that Sharon's grandmother – at 96 years old and in what turned out to be the final months of her life – moved from Philadelphia to Rockville and we were able to visit more often. When we brought our children we would make them give Bubby a hug and a kiss. It was hard at first – she was hooked up to oxygen; she was small and weak – but they soon came to do it without even being asked. And then they would talk about Bubby between visits. They saw her for the person she was – not just the outward appearance.

On Mitzvah Day, we bring the 6th graders over to the Hebrew Home to visit residents. You can imagine that it's hard for some of them. It's not just a "feel-good" moment. So I try to give a pep-talk and a little training. I tell them two things: First, I say, to try to see them not as elderly and infirm, but as human beings with stories and accomplishments – that sometimes you know and often you don't. And the second thing is to manage expectations. They can't expect that every resident is going to be bright-eyed and cheery-faced. They can't expect to change everything. But they need to be there. They need to see. They need to let the residents see them, so as to acknowledge their common humanity.

The need to see extends to other areas as well. *Derekh erez* means that it matters to me as a Jew that there are people here in the Washington community who do not have the resources to feed their families. It matters to me as a Jew that there are people in this country who cannot afford something as basic as housing or healthcare. It must matter to me as a Jew that our society is so easily divided into the "haves" and the "have nots", that these two sides rarely meet but they experience the world in radically different ways.

Reasonable people may disagree about public policy prescriptions for healthcare, education, and a whole host of other issues. But I cannot say that the experiences of the other do not matter to me. Judaism demands that we see the Other and her struggles and accept a level of responsibility as messengers, partners with God.

God is not only in the heavens. The path to God is not only through ritual. I know the Mahzor says that God sits in heaven and judges us on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. But I'm not sure I believe it. That's just metaphor. I believe in the God of Martin Buber, the God of "I and Thou." God is found when we transcend the "I-It" relationship, which is completely utilitarian, transactional, and ultimately self-serving. "I-Thou" means that I take the time and make the effort to get to know another person, to understand, to love, to see the divine image. Or the God of Emanuel Levinas, who wrote of the "face-to-face" relationship. When I look into a face and recognize a certain responsibility born of the fact that I am looking at another human being, that relationship is divine. The path to God is through responsibility, through relationship.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner says it this way:

Each lifetime is the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.
For some there are more pieces.
For others the puzzle is more difficult to assemble. ...

But know this. No one has within themselves
All the pieces to their puzzle. ...

Everyone carries with them at least one and probably
Many pieces to someone else's puzzle.

And when you present your piece ...
To another, whether you know it or not, ...
You are a messenger from the Most High.

Derekh eretz, the Path of the Earth.

There are things we can do to incorporate this concept into our lives:

- While you are here today, say hello to someone you don't know. Ask them how they came to B'nai Israel or what they are looking for. When all else fails, play "Jewish Geography"; you'll find someone you know in common pretty quickly.
- Give *tzedakkah*. Nothing makes us feel our responsibility towards others more than giving. My rule of thumb: Whatever amount seems appropriate ... give a little more.
- Reach out to a family member, friend or neighbor in need. Make an effort to mend a broken relationship. Visit the sick or the elderly, or someone who has suffered a loss - even though it may be uncomfortable to do so.
- If we follow the news cycle, we can try injecting ourselves into a debate and arguing the other side. We don't have to change our minds; we don't have to agree. But, just for a moment even, we can try to understand and explain. Try to see the divinity in the other side.
- Sign up for Mitzvah Day or a social action project. Volunteer to make a food delivery or pack boxes at Manna. Get involved in this ongoing conversation on *derekh eretz*. Look for information from our schools or in the Scroll so you and your children can talk the talk and walk the walk.

In one of his final addresses in the Torah, Moses instructs: "Be careful to heed all these commandments that I enjoin upon you ... כי תעשה הטוב והישר בעיני ה' אלהיך, For you shall do what is **good** and **right** in the sight of the Lord." Following a principle that there are no extra words in the Torah, the Rabbis ask what is meant by הטוב והישר, what is good **and** what is right? Why both words? And they answer that "הטוב, what is good" refers to the eyes of heaven; and "הישר, what is right" refers to the eyes of humanity. We need both.

היום הרת עולם, Today is the birthday of the world. Today is the day when God takes account as Sovereign over the vastness of the universe. But it is also a day for us. Today we must assert our own powers to connect by walking the Path of the Earth. On the anniversary of creation, let us pledge to continue and improve Creation through *derekh eretz*, that our efforts may bring about a year of שלום וברכה, peace and blessing for all. Shanah tovah.