

Parashat Ki Tetze, 5770, 2010:

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Derech Eretz, Chodesh Elul, and Teshuvah

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the L-rd; even the tenth generation shall never enter the assembly of the L-rd. Because they did not greet you with bread and water on the way, when you left Egypt, and because he [the people of Moab] hired Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim against you, to curse you. (*Sefer Devarim 23: 4-5*, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Our *parasha* is a rich repository of the *mitzvot* of the Torah. Indeed, 74 of the 613 Biblical commandments are stated herein. One of them is found in the above-quoted passage: the eternal prohibition for a male Ammonite or Moabite to marry a Jewish woman (“enter the assembly of the L-rd,” *Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 73a*). Two reasons are given for this prohibition: “Because they did not greet you with bread and water on the way, when you left Egypt, “ and “because he [the people of Moab] hired Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim against you, to curse you.”

The great Torah exegete, Rabbi Chaim ben Moshe Attar (1696-1743), known after the title of his most famous work as the “Or Hachaim,” asked a fundamental question regarding the dual reasons presented by the Torah for the above-stated prohibition: “Since [Moab in particular] hired Balaam to curse the Jewish people [ultimately resulting in the deaths of 24,000 Jewish males], why did the Torah include the seemingly quite secondary reason of “Because they did not greet you with bread and water on the way,

when you left Egypt?” (Translation and brackets my own) As is his wont, Rav Attar’s response opens new vistas of Torah understanding. In his view, the failure of these nations to greet us in an open-handed and magnanimous fashion with gifts of food and water was sufficient cause to enact the law that forever barred the males from marrying Jewish women. This is the case, since: “...they more than any other nations were obligated to act with *derech erez* (in an ethical and moral manner) because of the nearly unlimited kindness that *Avraham Avinu* (our father Abraham), peace be upon him, had demonstrated toward them.” (Translation my own) We must remember that Lot, Avraham’s nephew, was the progenitor of both Ammon and Moab, and that Avraham, the founder of our nation, had rescued Lot from the murderous hands of marauding armies. As such, Ammon and Moab quite simply owed us unlimited *derech erez*. At a minimum, this surely would have included “greeting us with bread and water on the way, when you left Egypt.” Yet, this is precisely what they failed to do. As such, this and this alone, suggests the Or Hachaim, was ample reason to eternally exclude the men of Ammon and Moab from marrying Jewish women.

Chazal (our Sages of blessed memory) placed a great deal of emphasis upon the singular importance of *derech erez*. This is particularly the case, since during the 26 generations from Adam to Moshe; *derech erez* was the moral and ethical code of mankind:

Rabbi Yishmael bar Rav Nachman declared: “*Derech Eretz* preceded the [giving of] the Torah by 26 generations.” Thus the verse states: “And He [G-d] drove the man out, and He stationed from the east of the Garden of Eden the cherubim and the blade of the revolving sword, to guard the way to the Tree of Life.” The expression “the way” (“*derech*”) refers to *derech erez*. Afterwards we find “the Tree of Life” (“*Eitz Hachaim*”), this is the Torah.” (*Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 9:3, translation and underlining my own.)

This passage is fascinating in that it appears to be the source for the oft-quoted epigram: “*Derech erez kadmah l’Torah,*” (“*derech erez* precedes the Torah”). While this statement is almost always given a homiletic interpretation focusing upon the primacy of ethical behavior, it seems that it most authentically should be viewed as an actual historical statement. That is, *derech erez* literally preceded the Torah by 26 generations.

Given all of the above, we are now ready to ask an essential question that is particularly apropos for the month of Elul: “What is *derech erez*?” We need to ask ourselves this question so that the expression does not get lost in the dustbin of sound bites and slogans that make up so much of today’s culture. In addition, if we can understand this term conceptually, we have a much greater chance of integrating its content into the challenges of our daily lives.

In his commentary to Parashat Noach, the world-renowned chasidic rebbe and scholar, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905), known as the “Sefat Emet” after the title of his most famous book, explains “that *derech erez* are the *middot* (moral and ethical characteristics) of an individual.” Moreover, in his commentary to Parashat Acharei Mot, he opines that this refers specifically to the mandate “to eschew the pursuit of jealousy, hedonistic pleasures, and glory.” This statement is congruent with the famous mishnah in *Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers)* that states: “Rabbi Eliezer Hakafar said: ‘Jealousy, hedonistic pleasures, and the pursuit of glory remove a person from this world.’” (4:21) Unfortunately, each one of these traits has the potential to become all-consuming in nature, and thereby capture a person in a self-spun web of loathsome behaviors.

Moreover, someone who pursues jealousy, hedonistic pleasures, and the pursuit of glory is often blinded to the noble and good in man. Then, too, someone who falls deeper into the pit of these unfettered desires potentially removes himself from the redemptive and transformative power of *teshuvah* (repentance) – perhaps the greatest gift that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He) has bestowed upon mankind.

The month of Elul represents closeness to Hashem and the reinvigoration of the love relationship that obtains between G-d and man. Once again we are preparing ourselves for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, for the Days of Awe. Once again we will stand before Hashem and literally beg Him for our lives, livelihood, and the health and happiness of our families, friends, and the entire Jewish people. As such, we need to focus upon each and every aspect of *derech eretz* in our lives in order to develop and refine our ethical and moral characteristics. In particular, and in light of the comments of the Sefat Emet, we need to cease being jealous, stop pursuing raw and undisciplined pleasures, and stop chasing after *kavod* (glory).

May *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* endow us with the strength of character and presence of mind to grow in *derech eretz* and thereby invest Chodesh Elul with deeper spiritual meaning and heart-felt *teshuvah*. As the prophet Yermiahu so beautifully stated some 2600 years ago in *Megilat Eichah* 5:21: “*Hashiveinu Hashem alecha v’nashuvah chadash yemeinu k’kedem*” (“Restore us to You, O L-rd, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old”). *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html .

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The E-mail list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via E-mail rdbe718@gmail.com.