

Derech Eretz, Respect and Consent: *Middot in the Modern Age*

READING #1: What is Derech Eretz?

Jewish tradition teaches us about the notion of *derekh eretz*, commonly translated as “the way of the world.” *Derekh eretz* is the code of proper behavior that binds us to each other as human beings and as Jews. According to the midrash, *derekh eretz* “precedes” the Torah (Leviticus Rabbah 9:3). We can understand this to mean that even before we begin to do important things like study Torah and live in accordance with the mitzvot, we must live with *derekh eretz*.

In Pirke Avot, the Ethics of our Ancestors, we learn from Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah: “If there is no Torah, there is no *derekh eretz*. And if there is no *derekh eretz*, there is no Torah (3:21).” Jewish tradition and Jewish practice are intertwined with Jewish behaviors. One does not come before the other, but instead each one complements the other. By aspiring to lives filled with *derekh eretz*, we can teach our children that there is always room for change and growth, and that love, appreciation and respect are very Jewish words.

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/teaching-your-children-about-derech-eretz/>

READING #2: Which Comes First?

שצריך תחלה לתקן את עצמו במדות ובזה תשכון התורה עליו, שאינה שוכנת לעולם בגוף שאינו בעל מדות טובות. לא שילמוד התורה ואחר יקח לו המדות כי זה אי אפשר.

One must first improve one's own character traits and with that, the Torah can endure with him because it cannot endure with a person that doesn't have good character traits. One cannot learn Torah first and then acquire good character traits because this is impossible.

- Rabbeinu Yona to Avos, Chapter 3

- ***What is the relationship between the Torah and derech eretz?***

READING #3: Derech Eretz and Communication

ספר במדבר, פרק ט"ז, פסוק ג'

ויקהלו על-משה ועל-אהרן ויאמרו אליהם רב-לכם כי כל-העדה כלם קדשים ובתוכם
ה' ומדוע תתנשאו על-קהל ה'

They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the LORD is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the LORD’s congregation?”

רש"י: פסוק א'

והלבישן טליתות שכלן תכלת, באו ועמדו לפני משה, אמרו לו טלית שכלה של תכלת
תיבת בציצית או פטורה? אמר להם תיבת, התחילו לשחק עליו, אפשר טלית של מן
אחר חוט אחד של תכלת פוטר, זו שכלה תכלת לא תפטר את עצמה?

and he attired them in robes of pure blue wool. They then came and stood before Moses and said to him, “Is a garment that is entirely of blue subject to the law of Zizith or is it exempt”? He replied to them: “It is subject to that law”. **Whereupon they began to mock him**: “Is this possible? A robe of any different coloured material, one thread of blue attached to it exempts it, and this that is entirely of blue should it not exempt itself from the law of “Zizith”?

- **What does the word “ויקהלו על-משה” in פסוק ג mean?**
- **What does Rashi teach us about the behavior of the group while voicing their concerns to Moshe?**
- **What do we learn about the approach of Korach and his men to their problem from the above sources?**
- **Would you consider their actions derech erez?**
- **What would have been a better way to present their concerns?**
- **How does this connect with how we can behave with derech erez in our modern worlds? What issues have you encountered where people have not shown proper derech erez by using words and the way we speak?**

READING #4: What is consent?

“Consent is verbal and...
is an active process between two people;
is activity-specific;
can be taken back at any time;
must be given in a free and clear mindset.” www.tolerance.org

- ***How does this definition of consent show an understanding of derech erez?***

READING #5: Derech Eretz and Consent in Action: Scenario

Imagine Aaron wants to read his friend Rachel's text messages. How does consent factor in?

- Why should Aaron ask Rachel? (Because it's Rachel's, and she gets to set her boundary—remember, boundaries are self-created. Aaron can ask, but getting consent needs to be an *active* process between him and Rachel.)
- If Rachel gives Aaron consent to read her texts, can Aaron also take a screenshot and share it with his other friends? (No. Consent is *activity specific*. Rachel might be OK with sharing her texts with Aaron but not with his friends. That needs to be a separate conversation.)
- What if Rachel changes her mind and asks Aaron to stop reading her texts and give her phone back? (Aaron should stop and return it. Boundaries can change, and *consent can be taken back at any time*. Aaron doesn't have to understand why Rachel changed her mind to treat her well and respect her boundaries.)
- Should Aaron ask Rachel about reading her texts while she's sleeping and take her snoring as a "yes"? (No. If Rachel's not actively listening and hearing what Aaron is asking permission for, she can't give consent in a free and clear mindset. What other things might cause her to not have a free and clear mindset?)
- Is it OK for Aaron to beg, pressure, threaten or make Rachel feel guilty if she doesn't want to let him see her phone? (No. *Consent must be given in a free and clear mindset*—it's not fair for Aaron to disrespect Rachel by making her feel bad about setting her own boundaries.)

(adapted from <https://www.tolerance.org>)

- ***Which moments here show derech erez? Which ones don't?***
- ***In this scenario, what is the best way to demonstrate derech erez?***
- ***What SHOULD derech erez in middle schools look like, even when teachers aren't watching?***

READING #6: Derech Eretz in the Modern World

“What #MeToo Means to Teenagers”, *NYTimes*, by Wendy Lu

When the #MeToo movement exploded on social media in October, the reaction among Maddy Eichenberg’s female friends at school was, “Yeah, this is pretty much our reality.”

“It’s just something high school girls know they have to deal with,” said Ms. Eichenberg, 18, a senior at Lexington High School in Lexington, Mass. “A lot of female friend groups know about high school boys who have been treating women in a gross way, and they make sure their friends stay away from them.”

While the #MeToo movement has largely focused on adult perpetrators, children and adolescents who engage in sexual harassment, bullying and abuse can also leave their victims with deep and lasting scars. Research shows that 43 percent of middle school students experience sexual harassment from their peers.

- ***There is a generalization here about how boys/men behave: what is it? (Point to a line in the source that shows it.)***
- ***If “43 percent of middle school students experience sexual harassment from their peers,” what does this tell us about derech erez?***
- ***How does accepting poor behavior as “normal” lead to more poor behavior?***

READING #7: Derech Eretz and Issues with Others

High School Girls Admitted to Making False Sexual Assault Accusations Against a Male Student Because They ‘Just Don’t Like Him’

Seneca Valley School District in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is facing a lawsuit from a former male student who was forced out of school—and investigated for sexual assault—due to a series of false accusations made by female students.

The girls—dubbed “mean girls” in the lawsuit, a reference to the 2004 Lindsay Lohan film—admitted on tape that they made up the assault story. One said, “I just don’t like him” and “[I] would do anything to get him expelled,” according to The Toronto Sun.

The false allegations were life-derailing for the accused, who is referred to as “T.F.” in the lawsuit. On October 3, 2017, one of the girls told other students that T.F. had sexually assaulted her at a pool; a Seneca Valley guidance counselor overheard the accusation, and reported it to Childline,

the state's child abuse prevention agency, as required by law. T.F. was swiftly charged with indecent assault and harassment, and received six months of probation as part of a plea deal.

Months later, in March of 2018, T.F. was again falsely accused, according to the lawsuit. Another girl invited him over to a house party; a few days later, she told the school guidance counselor that T.F. had broken into her home and sexually assaulted her. The lawsuit claims she was coached by T.F.'s first accuser. As a result of this accusation, T.F. was charged with assault and criminal trespassing. He was removed from school in leg and wrist shackles, and spent 9 days in juvenile detention.

By the end of the summer, the conspiracy against T.F. was unmasked: other students came forward with Snapchat messages that contradicted the claims of the "mean girls," who eventually admitted to lying. All charges against T.F. were dropped.

https://reason.com/blog/2018/10/17/seneca-valley-mean-girls-false-sexual?fbclid=IwAR2V6ZV7vmPTTS1857wXktaQXayIBQB2P_h6uZnjQajOVXNldRuY-Ri3fCA

- **Why did the girls do this? Was this ethical?**
- **In what way does the girls' behavior contradict the idea of derech erez?**
- **What connections can you make between this news story and the story of Korach?**
- **If the girls had concerns about T.J., what would have been a better way to present their concerns?**

READING #8: How do others perceive our derech erez?

ספר שמואל ב' פרק ו':

וַיִּדּוּד מְכַרְפֵּר בְּכָל־עֹז לְפָנָיו הַ וַיְדוּד חָגוּר אֶפֹּד בָּדָ:

David whirled with all his might before Hashem; David was dressed with a linen ephod.

דָּוִד וְכָל־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל מְעֵלִים אֶת־אָרוֹן הַ בַּתְּרוּעָה וּבְקוֹל שׁוֹפָר:

Thus David and all the House of Israel brought up the Ark of Hashem with shouts and with blasts of the horn.

וַהֲיָה אָרוֹן הַ בָּא עִיר דָּוִד וּמִיִּכָל בַּת־שְׂאוּל נִשְׁקָפָה בְּעֵד הַחֲלוֹן וַתֵּרָא אֶת־הַמֶּלֶךְ דָּוִד מִפְּנֵי וּמְכַרְפֵּר לְפָנָיו הַ וַתִּבֶּז לוֹ בְּלִבָּה:

As the Ark of Hashem entered the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and whirling before the Hashem; and she despised him for it.

וַיֵּשֶׁב דָּוִד לְבָרֶךְ אֶת־בֵּיתוֹ וַיֵּצֵא מִיֶּכַל בַּת־שָׁאוּל לְקִרְאֵת דָּוִד וַתֹּאמֶר מִה־נִּכְבַּד הַיּוֹם מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר נִגְלָה הַיּוֹם לְעֵינַי אֲמֹתוֹת עֲבָדָיו כְּהַגְלוֹת נִגְלוֹת אֶחָד הַרְקִים:

David went home to greet his household. And Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said, “Didn’t the king of Israel do himself honor today—exposing himself today in the sight of the slavegirls of his subjects, as one of the riffraff might expose himself!”

Metzudat David:

"And she despised him in her heart"- She despised him in her heart because she thought that this was not conduct for the king, especially before the ark.

- ***How does this story connect to derech erez? Why was Michal so angry at David?***
- ***How do our actions and the way we behave affect those around us?***
- ***Why is it important for us to understand that others may view our actions differently than our intentions?***

READING #9: Excerpt from *Of Mice and Men*

"What'd he do in Weed?" Slim asked again.

"Well, he seen this girl in a red dress. Dumb bastard like he is, he wants to touch ever' thing he likes. Just wants to feel it. So he reaches out to feel this red dress an' the girl lets out a squawk, and that gets Lennie all mixed up, and he holds on 'cause that's the only thing he can think to do. Well, this girl squawks and squawks.

Slim's eyes were level and unwinking. He nodded very slowly. "So what happens?"

George carefully built his line of solitaire cards. "Well, that girl rabbits in an' tells the law she been raped. The guys in Weed start a party out to lynch Lennie. So we sit in a irrigation ditch under water all the rest of that day. "

Slim sat in silence for a moment. "Didn't hurt the girl none, huh?" he asked finally.

“Hell, no. He just scared her. I’d be scared too if he grabbed me. But he never hurt her. He jus’ wanted to touch that red dress, like he wants to pet them pups all the time.”

- ***What about Lennie’s behavior made the woman in the red dress think he was attacking her?***
- ***How does this story connect with the story of David and Michal?***
- ***How would the woman’s consent-- based on our definition-- have changed this situation?***
- ***Do we consider consent differently based on the people involved and their mental capacities?***
- ***How can we help teach derech erez to people who face different challenges than we do?***

READING #10: How do we act with Derech Eretz?

Why does it say (Deut. 13: 5): “One should walk after God”? Is it possible to walk after the Shekhinah? Is He not like a consuming fire (ibid., 4:24)? Rather, it means that one should imitate His ways. As God clothed Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:21), so should we clothe the naked; as He visited the ailing (Rashi, Gen. 18: 1), so should we visit the sick; as He comforted Isaac after Abraham’s death (Rashi, Gen. 25: 11), so should we comfort mourners; as He buried Moses (Deut. 34:6), so should we care for the dignity of the dead (Sotah 14a).

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveichik

Imitating God: The basis of Jewish Morality

- ***How can we learn to behave with derech erez in our modern world?***
- ***How does the Torah help us with this?***
- ***What are some ways we can commit in our daily lives to behaving with derech erez?***