*Derech Eretz Kadma L’Torah*

To Be a Mensch

by

Rabbi Eliyahu Safran

When I was growing up, a friend whose parents were not home when school let out often came to my home after school. We enjoyed our afternoons together; we would do our homework, find something to amuse ourselves with and then have supper. After eating, we benched and then, without exception, before rising from the table, I said, “*todah rabah, imah*,” to my mother for preparing and serving the meal.

After one shared supper, my friend pulled me aside and, beyond the earshot of my mother, asked, “Eliyahu, why do you always thank your mother after supper, every single time? Isn’t it *her job* to prepare supper for you?”

*Parashat Tzav* opens with the Kohanim attending to the task of removing the ashes that had built up on the altar overnight. The Talmud describes how the Kohanim would quite literally do battle for the privilege of attending to this task. They would *race one another* up the ramp in order to attend to this job; to see who would get to the ashes first. The competition to perform this small but holy task grew so heated that, on one occasion, one Kohan shoved another off the ramp, causing him to fall and break his leg. Rather than end the competition, this seemed only to spur it on resulting in even more injury. Finally, a lottery system was enacted, bringing peace to this daily ritual.

What madness! Certainly, we can appreciate the desire of the Kohanim to serve the Lord, even in this relatively simple way. But the “enthusiasm” with which they approached the task just as surely diminished the sanctity of God’s Temple and caused disgrace to the House of God.

These days, we too often witness analogous acts of aggression and unpleasantness toward one another, all under the guise of increased piety and stricter adherence to the *mitzvot.* Such perpetrators of such unpleasantness would do well to remember the Jewish principle of “*derech eretz kadma l’Torah*” – meaning that “decency, kind behavior should precede Torah.”

In its most basic sense, this principle teaches that it is impossible to be rude, arrogant, rough and unpleasant while remaining a devoted servant of God. It is a contradiction. A true servant of God could no more be rude and unpleasant than dine on *treif*.

*So, Moshe went and returned to Jethro, his father in law, and said to him, “Let me now go back to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see if they are still alive.” And Jethro said to Moshe, “Go in peace.”*(Ex. 4:18)

Rashi notes that when Moshe was commanded to return to Egypt to fulfill his destiny to lead the people from bondage, he first approached his father-in-law, Jethro, and asked his permission. Astonishing! That the Creator of all should command Moses to deliver *B’nai Yisrael* from their bondage and *before doing so* Moses asked permission from Jethro?

What lesson can we possibly derive from this incredible tableau? It is as if Moses held up his hand to God and declared, “Hold on while I see if it’s all right for me to follow your command.”

And if Jethro said, No? What then? Would the Children of Israel continue to languish in slavery? Did Moses not realize exactly what God was telling him to do, and why?

Of course, Moses understood God’s command, and the profound urgency of the directive. But he also knew that he could hardly fulfill God’s commend if he failed at God’s desire for him to be a *mensch*. After all, Jethro had shown Moses great mercy and kindness. As the Midrash has it, Moses himself told God, “Jethro accepted me, opened his home to me, and treated me with honor. One owes his life to someone who opens his home to him. Therefore, I cannot go without his permission.”

Just as the great stones our ancestors made in Egypt could not hold together without mortar, so too the 613 building blocks of Judaism, our *mitzvot*, do not hold together to form a Jewish life without the mortar of *derech eretz*. Our *mitzvot* define the tasks, behaviors and rituals that we are obligated to perform or avoid, but it is ethics, morals and human decency which allow us to translate these *mitzvot* into a meaningful human life.

*Menschlichkeit is* not commanded; to be a *mensch* is not encoded in our law. But without being a *mensch* the performance of our laws is lacking. *Derech eretz kadmah l’Torah*. Decency comes before Torah. Torah cannot be without *derech eretz.*

Of course, God wants us to heed His commands. By the same token, He does not want us to be arrogant, rude and abusive. The *mitzvot* are not a cudgel for us to use to beat others! Quite the contrary, they are commandments which help us serve God *and* our fellows.

God wants us to be steeped in the finest *midos*; excelling first and foremost in *derech eretz*. And, as a practical matter, there is no easier or more compelling expression of *derech eretz* than *hakaras ha’tov*, a genuine and heartfelt “thank you” for things large and small, simple or life-changing.

How could Moshe have possibly heeded God’s command to go and save his enslaved brethren and not first bid farewell to Jethro? According to R’ Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the Alter of Slabodka, “If he would not have expressed his appreciation and recognition to his father in law for all he has done for him, God would not have wanted him for the leader of His nation”. A leader who knows not how to express *hakaras ha’tov* cannot possibly assume the mantle of leadership of *Klal Yisrael*.

How much more so should we all express our gratitude to those who make our lives special!

I think of this as I approach my dear mother’s *yahrzeit* this week. As children, we said *todah rabah* as we rose from the table. In our home, there was no such thing as “take out”. Everything we ate, she made from scratch with the most special of ingredients, her love and devotion to us. The very least we could do was to let her know how grateful we were – for her love and her hard work.

Sure, it was her “job”, just as it is the bus driver’s job to drive the bus and the police officer’s to protect. But certainly, that does not preclude a genuine “thank you.” Indeed, one might suggest that it demands it even more!