



## Pirkei Avot 2:2 *Derech Eretz* Precedes Torah

Pirkei Avot Chapter 2 Mishnah 2: Rabban Gamliel the son of Rabbi Judah HaNassi would say: Beautiful is the study of Torah with the way of the land (*derech erez*), for the toil of them both causes sin to be forgotten.

The simple meaning<sup>1</sup> of this teaching is that our main mission is to study Torah, but as we cannot learn Torah exclusively and must make a living, we should add earning a livelihood – called *derech erez* (literally, ‘the way of the land’) to our schedule. When a person toils at both Torah study and earning a living, he doesn’t have much spare time to engage in sin.

There is, however, a different explanation according to which *derech erez* is greater than Torah. This is the explanation for the teaching of the sages, “*Derech erez* preceded the Torah”<sup>2</sup>, which posits that the precedence of *derech erez* is not only in time, but in stature, as well. The third Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Tzemach Tzedek, brings four explanations for this concept:<sup>3</sup>

**The first explanation:** The proper way (*derech*) of service of God must be accompanied by identification with the lowliness of the earth (*erez*). The main rectification of a person is his recognition of his essential lowliness – how distant he is from God. Before we begin to study Torah we must contemplate on this and identify with our very lowly, weak human nature. This is reflected at the end of the Silent Prayer, in which we first say, “And may my soul be as dust to all,” and only then do we merit to ask for the next stage, “Open my heart to Your Torah.”<sup>4</sup>

**The second explanation:** The word *erez* is cognate to the word *ratzon*, ‘will’ and *ratz*, ‘running’. The *erez*, land, wills to run to God. “Why was it called *erez*? Because it

<sup>1</sup> See Rashi, Rabbeinu Yonah and more.

<sup>2</sup> *Vayikrah Rabbah* 9:3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ohr Hatorah*, part 3, p.583.

<sup>4</sup> From *Elokai Netzor* at the end of the Silent Prayer, see *Ta’anit* 17B.

wanted (*ratzta*) to do the will (*ratzon*) of its maker.”<sup>5</sup> The numerical value of *derech erez* is the same as *tefillah*, prayer. This teaches us that the main time that we have a will to run to God is when we are praying to Him. Prayer is the ascent from the lowly land to God. According to this, “*Derech erez* precedes Torah” is prefacing our Torah study with prayer, as in the Mishnah: Rabbi Nechunyah ben Hakaneh would pray a short prayer when he entered the study hall and when he exited.”<sup>6</sup>

**The third explanation:** *Derech erez* refers to Jewish customs, which take precedence in their stature over the laws of the Torah: “The words of the scribes (the directives of the sages) are dearer than the words of Torah (the directives of the Torah).”<sup>7</sup> The expression *derech erez* is explained here as the ‘way of the world.’ The customs that were accepted by the Nation of Israel, as per the directives of the sages, are higher in stature than the directives of the Torah.<sup>8</sup>

**The fourth explanation:** *Derech erez* refers to Jewish unity. In Kabbalistic terms, the Torah is “the World of Rectification,” but above that is the “World of Binding” (*Olam Ha’akudim*) in which all the souls are bound together in one vessel. When unity reigns – even unity among criminals – its root is in the lofty World of Binding. This is the *derech erez* that is higher in stature than the World of Rectification – the Torah.

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<sup>5</sup> *Breishit Rabbah* 5:8.

<sup>6</sup> *Berachot* 28B.

<sup>7</sup> As per the Jerusalem Talmud, *Brachot* 1:4; *Avodah Zarah* 35A.

<sup>8</sup> Siddur with D”ach starting from וּשְׂאֵבֶתָם מֵיָם.