

Heritage Foundation Pursues Right Conduct

By Ellen Kort with Dr. Daniel Scharf
Jewish Heritage Foundation

In a time of great turmoil and trouble in our society, each of us, nonetheless, has opportunities in the small encounters of everyday life to show kindness and be of help to others. We have only to look to the more than 200 teachings in the Talmud and Midrash concerning derech erez as decent, polite, respectful, thoughtful and civilized behavior. One representative teaching is that “Derech erez comes before Torah” – one cannot personify Torah until he demonstrates derech erez in everything he does. Literally, derech erez means “the way of the land,” but within the context of Jewish culture, it implies everything from civility and grace to general culture and knowledge.



James Maidhof Photography
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At the Jewish Heritage Foundation, it is our most sincere intent to behave in a manner most fitting of derech erez. Our board and staff are committed to the principles inherent in acting with consideration and kindness to our fellow human beings and in so doing, fulfilling the will of G-d. This translates not only to the agencies that are recipients of our funds, but also to agencies who are not; to organizations that want assistance with proposals and individuals who may just want to discuss an idea. Certainly, it is very difficult to completely remove the barrier between grant seeker and grant maker, but the most successful relationships and projects are made when there is transparency between both.

I began writing this article on a very different subject – reframing recent articles about the Jewish Heritage Foundation’s rededication and plans for the coming year. Then I learned that our beloved founding president Don Tranin, had passed away.

I do not know anyone else who embodied the principle of derech erez, more than Don – though he may not have been aware of the phrase. Torah im Derech Eretz, as a philosophy, was first articulated by Rabbi Samson R. Hirsch (1808-1888). In his view, Judaism must “include the conscientious promotion of education and culture.” Rabbi Hirsch speaks of the Mensch-Yisroel (“Israel-man”) the “enlightened religious personality” as an ideal: that is the Jew who is proudly Jewish, a believer in the eternal values of the Torah, but also possessing the ability to engage with and influence contemporary culture and knowledge. As we begin the New Year, may we see the words of Derech Eretz in Don: the way in which he walked among the land. May we all choose to emulate this practice as we embark upon the New Year. L’Shanah Tovah.

As we begin the New Year, we hope that our tzedakah and the good work of the organizations we support will inspire members of the community to continue deep tradition.

L’Shanah Tovah.