

**Sermon/Drasha *Derech Eretz* –
on the occasion of Sam & Shirley Bluestein's 60th anniversary 12/28/2013
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For the past two decades, Peyton Manning has elevated the standards of NFL quarterbacks. Manning, this year's *Sports Illustrated's Sportsman of the Year*, installed a film projector in the basement of his house when he was first drafted by the Indianapolis Colts. He watched every practice. Before game-day, Manning has a ritual of cleaning the equipment room and shutting the door so he can select his 12 game balls in peace. First, he washes his hands. Then, he throws one ball after another to the equipment manager, barking "game" if the ball makes the cut, "pregame" if it doesn't. He once asked his manager, "Why can't the seams be perfect?" He'd sew themselves, if he could.

One of Manning's former coaches said, "When Peyton Manning dies, this is what they ought to write on his gravestone: IT ALL MATTERED TO ME." But to the wealthy and famous quarterback, some things matter more than others.

Early in life Manning learned the power of the handwritten note. Throughout his career Manning has written to coaches and players who retire, as well as widows of coaches and players who pass away. He writes to subjects of documentaries he's seen. He writes to victims of tragedies he's heard about. It's hard to find any coach, teammate or staffer who hasn't received a note from Manning. "I got one when my dad passed," says one coach, "and another when Peyton stayed at my house." "I got one when I retired," says a video director. "It almost brought me to tears." A former strength coach said, "I got one when the Colts let me go. It meant more than any paycheck."

Manning receives roughly 300 pieces of fan mail in a given week. The notes that move him, he takes home and responds to. To Jack Benson, an eight-year old in California with cancer, Manning wrote:

"I just wanted you to know that you are in my thoughts and prayers. Your cousin ...wrote to me and told me of the tough fight you hare having. You have a lot of people pulling for you. I am glad to know you are a Bronco fan! Keep fighting, stay positive, and say your prayers."

Sometimes, instead of a note, Manning picks up the phone on the 25-minute drive home after practice. "I cold-call them," he says. "I block my number and they don't answer, so then you have to call back at night. They think it's a prank call, but after that, you just take a moment and listen."

It may be true that to Peyton Manning, it all matters. But it's clear that to the all-world quarterback, one thing matters more than all else: People.

People, and their feelings, matter to Peyton Manning. And certainly to us, as Jews, people should matter.

Talk is cheap, and it's easy to profess one's love of humanity while not really liking people. I'm reminded of the man who said, "I love traveling overseas, except for one thing: Too many foreigners." How do you know if people really matter to someone? Not by how good a heart they claim to have. Not by how religious or observant they appear in *mitzvos bain adam l'Makom*, -- those mitzvos governing our personal relationship to G-d, such as prayer, kashrus, and Shabbos.

How do you know if people matter to someone? By the way they treat other people. We have an expression for this in Hebrew. It's an important expression, one unfamiliar to many. The term is *derech erez*. Literally, 'the way of the land', *derech erez* is the behavioral expression of one's character. The signs of good character are polite, respectful, thoughtful and civilized behavior. A more familiar expression of *derech erez* is "being a mensch."

We can tell if people matter to someone by the way they treat others. But *derech erez* and being a mensch have to begin with excellent eye sight: We need to become experts in discerning a person's situation to see what they need and who they are -- as the following story humorously indicates.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, was quite impressed with the observational powers of a cab driver who picked him up at the train station after a vacation in the south of France. As he stepped into the cab and put his suitcase on the seat next to him, the driver surprised him by asking him, "Where would you like to go, Mr. Doyle?"

Doyle was surprised he knew his name, and asked whether they had ever met before. The driver said no, which prompted Doyle to ask how he knew who he was.

The driver replied, "This morning's paper had a story about you being on vacation in Marseilles. This is the taxi stand where people who return from Marseilles always come to. Your skin color tells me that you have been on vacation. The ink spot on your right index finger suggests to me that you are a writer. Your clothing is very English, and not French. Adding up all those pieces of information, I deduce that you are Sir Arthur Conan Doyle."

"That, and your name is on your suitcase."

But simply caring about others and understanding their needs isn't, as was said, enough.

Most know the name of the first President of the modern state of Israel, Chaim Weizmann. But Yitzchak Ben-Zvi, Weizmann's successor, is less-well known.

Born in 1884 in what today is the Ukraine, Ben-Zvi was active in the Jewish self-defense units organized in Ukraine to defend Jews during pogroms, and was later active in the Haganah. But while Israel's second President had a tough side, he was also a simple and exceedingly decent man.

Ben-Zvi believed that the president should set an example for the public and his home should reflect the austerity of the times. For over 26 years, he and his family lived in a wooden hut in the Rehavia neighborhood of Jerusalem.

In 1952, on the day he was made President, he returned home to find a sentry marching in front of his home. Ben-Zvi asked what the fellow was doing there and he replied that he was sent by the Chief of Staff as an honor guard before the home of the President.

Rubbing his head in amazement, Ben-Zvi entered his house. It was winter in Jerusalem and the night was cold. After a few minutes, he came out and said, "Look here, it is cold tonight. Won't you come in and at least have some hot tea?" The soldier replied, "I cannot leave my post. Orders are orders." Foiled, Ben-Zvi reentered his house. After a while he turned to his wife and asked her to make some tea; then he went again and greeted the soldier. "I have an idea. You go in and have tea and I will stand outside with your gun and take your post."

Such *menschlichkeit* defines the Jew! The Talmud comments that when a person has compassion for humanity, it is a sign that he is a descendant of Abraham and Sarah.

Acting with *derech erez* isn't simply the right thing to do; every act of *derech erez* has the potential to create positive ripple effects and a *kiddush HaShem*.

Rabbi Berel Wein was once invited to a meeting with the editor of the Detroit Free Press. After introductions had been made, the editor told him the following story.

His mother, Mary, had immigrated to America from Ireland as an uneducated, 18-year-old peasant girl. She was hired as a domestic maid by an observant family. The head of the house was the president of the neighboring Orthodox shul.

Mary knew nothing about Judaism and had probably never met a Jew before arriving in America. The family went on vacation in Mary's first December in America, leaving Mary alone in the house. They were scheduled to return on the night of December 24, and Mary realized that there would be no Christmas tree to greet them when they did. This bothered her greatly, and using the money the family had left her, she went out and purchased not only a Christmas tree but all kinds of festive decorations to hang on the front of the house.

When the family returned from vacation, they saw the Christmas tree through the living room window and the rest of the house festooned with holiday lights. They assumed that they had somehow pulled into the wrong driveway and drove around the block. But alas, it was their address.

The head of the family entered the house wondering how to explain the Christmas tree and lights to the members of the shul, most of whom walked right past his house on their way to shul. Meanwhile, Mary was eagerly anticipating the family's excitement when they realized that they would not be without a Christmas tree.

After entering the house, the head of the family called Mary into his study. He told her, "In my whole life no one has ever done such a beautiful thing for me as you did." Then he took out a \$100 bill -- a very large sum in the middle of the Depression -- and gave it to her. Only after that did he explain that Jews do not have Christmas trees.

When he had finished telling the story, the editor told Rabbi Wein, "And that is why, there has never been an editorial critical of Israel in the Detroit Free Press since I became editor, and never will be as long as I am the editor."

The shul president's reaction to Mary's mistake -- gentle compassion instead of anger -- was not because he dreamed that one day her son would be the editor of a major metropolitan paper, and thus in a position to aid Israel. (Israel was not yet born.) He acted as he did because it was the right thing to do.

That is what it means to act with *derech erez*. And in the process of acting like a mensch, one may create a *kiddush Hashem*, a sanctification of G-d's Name. Acting with *derech erez* is a goal to which we can all strive -- if and only if -- people really matter.

The message of the importance of *derech erez* is always appropriate, but is particularly relevant today as we celebrate the 60th anniversary of Sam & Shirley Bluestein.

It's important in life to be well-balanced. And if any couple is well-balanced, it's Sam and Shirley.

Some say that the definition of a well-balanced person is someone who has a chip on BOTH shoulders! But being a good Jew, in the fullest sense of the term, means being well-balanced in the things that matter. A healthy, all-around Jew takes his relationship with G-d seriously, and is simultaneously meticulous about how he treats others.

Individually and as a couple, Sam and Shirley are two of the most pleasant, easy going people I know. Shirley always makes a point of complimenting others, asking sincerely about your family. When Sam and Shirley can't make a class, will be gone for a Shabbos or are about to leave town, they always make a point of letting me know. The Bluesteins have perfected the rabbinic maxim of greeting each person with *saver panim yaffos* -- a smiling, shining countenance. Sam and Shirley have no rough edges or sharp corners.

When you walk away from a conversation from Sam and Shirley, you always feel better. Not long ago I mentioned to Shirley that my grandfather came from Boston, Shirley's home town. We chatted for a bit about our family histories, and then Shirley said. "Rabbi, I never knew your family also came from Boston. Now I know why I like you so much."

If you watch Sam carefully, you can see him put *derech erez* into practice in small, subtle ways. For example, after receiving an aliyah on Shabbos, he does something most people don't: he immediately walks to the front of the shul and walks up the bima to shake the rabbi's hand.

In conclusion, then: Peyton Manning has it right. It all matters, but some things matter more than others - people. People don't care how much you know about them ... once they realize how much you care about them. And Sam and Shirley, your caring for others, which is so evident, is undoubtedly a key to your wonderful, 60 year marriage. May Hashem bless you with good health and many more happy years together. Mazel tov.