



Address to United Synagogue Youth International Convention

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Introduction

Thank you for that kind introduction. Rabbi Wernick and Mr. Skolnick, thank you for inviting me to participate in the spirit and energy of this year's international convention. As a United Synagogue Youth alumnus, I am especially honored to celebrate with you on this distinguished organization's 60th birthday. I truly appreciate United Synagogue Youth's tremendous role in serving and developing our young men and women, for mentoring our youth is in effect building our future. With sincere gratitude, I wish to United Synagogue Youth a very happy birthday and the very best for even brighter futures.

As I look across this impressive audience, I am especially heartened by the abundant talent, energy, and dedication, which I see is replicated daily in our young men and women of the Air Force. I understand that during this week's activities, you have had valuable opportunities to reflect on the power of service, so I am privileged to have been asked to share some of my thoughts on this very important topic. To dovetail with the educational theme for this year's conference, I will cast my thoughts on service and leadership in the context of *derech eretz*.

The Significance of Service

We all come from a variety of backgrounds, and many have traveled far to be here today. And we all share membership in various communities, such as the community of our faith, the community of our Nation, and our local communities where we serve with friends and neighbors in our schools, our synagogues, and other venues that bring us closer together. President Obama has sounded the clarion call for our Nation to serve and sacrifice—both in the military and through other forms of public service. I join our Commander-in-Chief in encouraging you toward higher callings of commitment to others, because service to our country provides us with unique personal satisfaction that comes from setting aside pure self-interest for higher purposes. Public service also provides us with gratification from being a part of something larger than one's self.



But I would offer one additional perspective on service: that, in itself, service provides us with another level of community. In fact, I submit to you that the community of generous, thoughtful, and service-minded individuals constitutes one of the closest, most tightly-knit communities of all. If being proud Americans unifies us as a nation, generously serving our Nation unifies us even further, and strengthens us all the more.

In other words, public service provides for a unique type of fulfillment—a kind of prosperity that is intangible, and which you cannot deposit in a bank. But make no mistake: This wealth is definitely real. It is meaningful. And it is very much needed, particularly in this time of uncertainty for many in our Nation and our various communities.

***Derech Eretz* and Leadership**

The public service with which I am most familiar is, of course, military service. Perhaps some of you are members of a military household; or perhaps some of you aspire to serve in the military. It is, after all, a noble calling. You may not have realized it, but throughout this convention, you have focused on concepts that are fundamental to the development of military leadership skills—concepts so powerful and universal that they are equally effective both for those in the highest positions of leadership, as well as the most humble and loyal among us.

I am speaking of “*derech eretz*,” the code of ethics that guides how we treat others. Loosely translated, it means “the way of the world.” But as you know, its meaning is much deeper and more complex. Scholars have written on *derech eretz* to describe to us its many contours so that we can better understand behavior that most effectively binds us together as human beings. Dr. Shalom Freedman, for instance, writes that “*derech eretz* is, in its broadest sense, acting with consideration and kindness to one’s fellow human beings.”¹

For several decades, I have had the privilege of serving our country and the community of Airmen of your United States Air Force. As I thought about what I would discuss with you today, I reflected on my service in the Air Force and its

¹ Shalom Freedman, *Small Acts of Kindness*, 2004.



many professionals of the highest caliber, and I realized that I essentially have been guided by *derech erez* both in my personal efforts and in leading others.

Inspiring and leading others is particularly important to note here, because in the Air Force and the military, effective leadership is absolutely essential to what we do. Therefore, early in their careers, junior commissioned officers and noncommissioned officers immediately begin to practice leadership fundamentals that they learn in either their commissioning source or basic training, and they continue to refine their personal leadership skills through performance on the job and exposure to a variety of leadership positions and challenges. With this deliberate focus on effective leadership, the military has a sizable contingent of dedicated and capable team leaders, crew chiefs, and front-line supervisors who help commanders at all echelons exercise leadership. At all levels, commanders and his or her team of subordinate leaders are responsible for accomplishing the mission, and are personally involved in many aspects of caring for their team members—rewarding them, helping them, and yes, when necessary, enforcing the rules.

But truly successful commanders and leaders accomplish much more than just the mission; they also must take good care of their people. Truly successful commanders and leaders develop and mentor their people, helping them to become the leaders of tomorrow. I was fortunate to serve under very capable and thoughtful leaders to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for guiding and mentoring me well. More than a few of these leaders were USY adult volunteers. As I developed as a leader myself, I came to truly appreciate that basic human kindness and consideration are incredibly important and extremely powerful. I learned from many former commanders that people are motivated when they can plainly see the value of their contributions to the team.

So when leaders praise their people and clearly explain how each individual effort matters toward overall team effectiveness and mission accomplishment, the entire team benefits. On one particular occasion, a former commander of mine, during an extraordinarily difficult time when the work tempo was unrelenting, gathered his junior Airmen together, and he thanked them for their hard work.



Even though he was extremely busy with matters that attend to being a commander, he made sure that he took the time to explain to our junior Airmen the value of their efforts, and to give credit where it was due. All of the young Airmen left the meeting feeling good and confident that they had made it possible for us to reach the goals that we had set as a team.

This was, for me, a particularly powerful example. This simple expression of sincere gratitude—this demonstration of empathy—had uplifted those junior Airmen, who couldn't help but have a spring in their step for weeks to follow. Those few quick comments paid lasting dividends in future mission accomplishment. And what did it cost this former commander of mine? Nothing but the five very-well-spent minutes with the people who helped him get the job done. In fact, he himself also benefitted from the exchange, for he got to warmly convey respect for his Airmen, receiving from them genuine gratitude in return.

It has been my experience since then that it is much easier to motivate people to accomplish the mission when leaders treat everyone around them with dignity and respect. And I would add that this and other examples of *derech erez* have a cascading effect. We all can imagine that thereafter, each of those Airmen were more inclined to treat the Airmen whom they led, and other Airmen with whom they worked, more empathetically. I would like to think that they also proceeded with a renewed sense of concern for the entire team's well-being and a genuine appreciation for each other.

So, you see how *derech erez*, whether applied deliberately or as second nature, if one truly has advanced with his or her leadership skills, can change the tone of an entire community, be it a family, a neighborhood, a military unit, or a nation. When the lessons of *derech erez* guide our daily lives, the positive effects can be contagious. With a substantial amount of personal commitment and effort, and perhaps a little bit of luck, others will follow our example, and the entire community will benefit. In today's world, all too often, the bad examples get too much attention—in our conversations and in the media. But do not underestimate or discount the power of *derech erez* to capture people's attention and change their lives—and the lives of those in our respective communities.



Conclusion

Let me once more thank the United Synagogue Youth for serving our next generation so well. Again, as a proud alumnus, I very much value the role that USY played as a strong, positive influence during my own formative years. I have every confidence that this year's focus on *derech erez* will have a beneficial impact for years to come.

Young ladies and gentlemen, I urge you to consider the possibility of service to others—in the military or otherwise. If you are willing to demand a lot of yourself and others—and, through empathy and care, to inspire and lead others to do the same—then we have a place for you in the military. As you return home, continue your studies, and develop your leadership skills, put into practice the lessons that you learned here this week.

I thank you again for the opportunity to celebrate with the United Synagogue Youth today, and more importantly, for your commitment to excellence in service to others. I have genuine hope that programs like this are yielding an abundance of goodwill in each community that sent a United Synagogue Youth chapter to this convention. On behalf of the men and women of the United States Air Force and the Armed Forces of the United States, I wish all of you the very best for the New Year and the exciting future that will follow for each of you. Thank you.