

Won't You Be My Neighbor?

Rosh Hashanah 5779

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1968 was a year of stunning calamity. It saw the deaths of Robert F. Kennedy and of Martin Luther King, Jr. Our nation was gripped by confusion and dread. The night before RFK was buried at Arlington National Cemetery, a puppet appeared on television and asked, “What does assassination mean?” The puppet was a tiger named Daniel Striped Tiger. His voice belonged to a new children’s TV host named Fred Rogers.

1968 was not only a year of calamity but also the birth of something remarkable—“Mister Rogers Neighborhood,” a public television show hosted by an ordained minister who spoke directly to children, turning his Neighborhood of Make-Believe into a village of empathy, knowledge and wonder.

This summer Ashley and I went to see *Won't You Be my Neighbor*, a documentary about Mr. Rogers. Anybody else see it? I don’t know about you but even though I watched the show as a kid, the film taught me a lot I did not appreciate at the time. Like how the discussion of RFK’s death helped Rogers become for children and parents a soothing voice of reason and calm. He guided and consoled a grieving nation, a job he took on again and again, right up to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Fred Rogers’ lessons were simple. Listen—listen to your children, listen to each other, pause for a moment and listen. Be a good neighbor and friend. Take action to help your community. These ideas are so simple and so familiar that there is a risk we see them as pat or banal. But really, they are radical. And they are not just for children.

Let’s talk about listening.

Mr. Rogers once said:

When children bring up something frightening, it’s helpful right away to ask them what they know about it. We often find that their fantasies are very different from the actual truth. What children probably need to hear most from us adults is that they can talk with us about anything and that we will do all we can to keep them safe in any scary time.

Now, I am sure that most of us have a personal relationship with Mr. Rogers. The image of him putting on that classic cardigan and lacing up those sneakers—ever so delicately tying that knot reminds me of the safety and security that I felt during my childhood.

And now, one of the great joys of my life is the time in the morning I get to sit with my daughter on the couch watching Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood—the rebooted version of Mr. Rogers. Today the challenges that our children face are just as complex if not more so than those we faced, or our parents faced. Yet what has not changed, is the stunning central idea that Mr. Rogers understood and tried to teach in every episode: “When we love a person, we accept him or her exactly as is: the lovely with the unlovely, the strong along with the fearful, the true mixed in with

the façade, and of course, the only way we can do it is by accepting ourselves that way."

And that starts with listening. Before you can accept someone you have to hear them.

And see them. Just listen. A very simple idea, and yet a hard one to put into practice. Mr. Rogers's second lesson: be a good neighbor. Of course, Mr. Rogers is most famous for saying, "Won't you be my neighbor."¹ It was a line in the show's theme song. It's probably the line we remember most, even years later. And it was the title of the documentary.

Ask yourself what you are doing here today? Did you come here to be judged by your friends and your neighbors? Or did you come here because, this is where you needed to be—to not feel judged.

To feel supported and loved by those around you. We stand together when we ask for forgiveness because no one person is greater than the other—as a community and as neighbors we are all the support that we need. Still, we all have moments where we feel alone in this world. New York City is one of the largest cities in the world, teeming with people buzzing day and night. Yet, it can also be one of the most isolating.

How can we combat and push back against the sense of loneliness? It is so easy in our connected age to hole up with our phones or our tablets and distract ourselves into oblivion. But the High Holidays offer a moment to pause, and reflect. To listen and look around. To remember that you are part of a community of neighbors that sit right next to you. Look in front of you, or next to you, or behind you. Are you next to someone that you know or someone that you have never met? Take a moment to greet them and wish them a happy new year. Together, we make up a wonderful and diverse and beautiful community of seekers.

Even though it may not always feel that way, Mister Rogers reminds us that, "If you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet; how important you can be to the people you may never even dream of. There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person." The impact that you leave on another person is often not realized or measured at that moment. It can be felt and remembered years or decades down the line. Ask any teacher or counselor who bumped into one of their students or campers. They will tell you the impact realized that day began many years before.

If you have not yet heard, this year at Congregation Rodeph Sholom we will be launching Sholom Sprouts, our newest initiative for young children and the grown-ups who care for them. Offered in our beautifully renovated fifth floor, we will welcome in the next generation into our vibrant Jewish community through Shabbat and holiday celebrations, music, and art. Perhaps, most importantly we will affirm the teachings of our people and impart on the youngest amongst us that Judaism is a

¹ "Some Sad and Scary Things?: Mister Rogers Consoled Kids by Telling Them the Truth."

The Washington Post. June 08, 2018. Accessed September 20, 2018.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/06/08/some-sad-and-scary-things-mister-rogers-consoled-kids-by-telling-them-the-truth/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.df2b06d154a4

religion of love of the self and the love of others.

I believe that the youngest members of our community can have authentic and beautiful Jewish experiences that will leave an impact on who they are—at the very core of who they are. And though I may not know if that made a difference on their Jewish journey this year or next, I do believe that it will make a difference down the line. Yom Kippur afternoon, we will read from the book of Leviticus, a section known as the holiness code. And perhaps the greatest principle of Judaism is found within its verses. “V'ahavta l'reyecha k'mocha”—you should love your neighbor as yourself. That is the greatest principle! Not individual acts of piousness, not ritual service, but loving your neighbor.

So simple. And yet so hard to put into practice. And the last part of that phrase is important: love your neighbor as yourself. The Baal Shem Tov teaches us that your fellow human being is a mirror. If there is love and compassion in your soul, you will see the goodness in others. If you see a blemish in another, it is your own imperfections that you encounter. Take careful note of the flaws you perceive in others. We are likely to be oblivious to our own defects, but can easily detect shortcomings in other people. The Baal Shem Tov instructs us to take such observations as indications that we have these shortcomings ourselves².

What a tremendous idea. That the way God allows us to see our faults is through other people. I know from my own personal experience, the people who arouse these feelings in me I pretty quickly realize are doing something I used to do or still do to this day. Viewing the world through a mirror provides us with two opportunities. The first: *teshuva*. When we become aware to qualities and character traits in others, we are able to work on and refine those same traits within ourselves. If we meditate on these matters, we can begin to have a better understanding of ourselves and how our behavior can effect and affect others in ways that we may not have realized. When we notice the faults in others, we should see that as a red flag that we have work to do on ourselves.

And second, have compassion on yourself and your neighbor by loving your neighbor as you love yourself. I think that everyone can probably agree that loving your neighbor is a good mitzvah to strive for. But when it comes to loving those people who bother you, it's much easier in concept than practice. It is true that to love someone—even a neighbor isn't easy. We all have friends or family or neighbors that drive us up the wall. Everyone has a Ned Flanders—that frustrating neighbor from *The Simpsons*.

To love your neighbor forces you to stretch yourself, to look beyond yourself, and enter into a relationship with another. When we realize that the reason these people bother us is because they're struggling with things we ourselves have struggled with, it should immediately spark feelings of compassion. The mirror is the key to loving those whom we have trouble loving. You can love them as yourself in the way that you give yourself breaks and rationalize your own personal faults. Just extend that perspective to them.

To be humble and vulnerable is hard, but the reward that love offers us is as necessary to us as the

² Goldberg, Edwin C., Janet Ross Marder, Sheldon Joseph Marder, and Joel Shapiro. *Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe*. New York: CCAR Press, 2015=

air we breathe. As Fred Rogers's teaches, "Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like 'struggle'. To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now." When we begin to recognize in each other the divine spark that exists within each of us, we are able to move past the differences that we perceive. It is not about truth or faith, but a simple human idea of dignity. That each of us, is created in God's image, and that each of us has the ability to act as such.

Mister Rogers' third lesson: action.

Mr. Rogers said, "There are many ways to say I love you. There are many ways to say I care." He listed some examples: being there when things are sad and scary, cleaning up a room, hanging up a coat before you're asked to do it, drawing special pictures for the holidays, and making plays. Ultimately, the most important thing we can do is share our love with the people we care about. "As you grow, I trust that you are finding many more ways to show and tell people that you love them," he said. "Those are the most important things that you'll ever learn to do. Because loving people and animals and the world we live in is the most important part of being alive."

Finally, of the many lessons taught by Mister Rogers, maybe the idea that we can work together to make a difference right where we are is tantamount to all. In one of my favorite episodes, Mr. Rogers invited an African-American police officer, played by François Clemmons, to rest his feet in a pool on a hot day. Morgan Neville, the filmmaker who made the Rogers documentary, writes, "He was, in his own quiet, subtle way trying to model how we should treat each other. It's really the thing he's doing over and over with: Won't you be my neighbor? What he's asking is: How do we treat each other? What kind of neighborhood are we going to have? What are the rules by which we live in a society together?"³

It is so simple. And yet so hard.

I can think of no greater lesson to teach our children in today's current political and social reality: that action is demanded of each of us to see the divine sparks that exist in the other. For one, we can reach out to those outside who are in need. This is the power of *mitzvot* and *tikkun olam*—the Jewish command to go out and make the world a better place than we found it. Love is not just about caring, it is about responsibility to another person. Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg teaches that in Hebrew, the word for responsibility is *achrayut*, from the word *acher*, meaning another. It's about the willingness to move beyond yourself and to enter into the space of another. And when we do that, we find not only do we "make change," but that we are changed. The transformation isn't just over there. It is here. Within us, and in the spaces between us.

Our community has certainly answered the challenge and call to be responsible to the other. CRS is one of the charter members of the Synagogue Coalition on the Refugee and Immigration Coalition. Through the hard work of our Refugee Task Force we have successfully resettled three young men, originally from Pakistan, and await a fourth who is soon to arrive. We are proud of this sacred work

³ Kelly, Mary Louise. "Mister Rogers Talked Frankly With Kids About 'Grown-Up' Issues That Weren't." NPR. June 08, 2018. Accessed September 20, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/06/08/618305433/mister-rogers-talked-frankly-with-kids-about-grown-up-issues-that-weren-t>

and see it as living out the core values of our community.

I believe in this community's ability to push forward and push beyond the simple notion that the world is broken. I believe in our community's strength and resolve to see that challenges are not going to cause us to withdraw, but instead offer us opportunities to reach out a hand and hold each other up. Next month our community will come together for yet another Mitzvah Weekend. Our congregation's name consists of two words, Rodeph, which means "pursuer," and "Sholom" of course means peace. This year, we will partner with each other and organizations all around the area to push back against food insecurity and become actors and pursuers of justice and peace—*rodeph sholom*.

Today, more than ever, that appears to be the challenge that is in front of us. In a world where the rules of society and common decency are beginning to disintegrate, we come together in defense of that—and in many ways in spite of that. We, the Jewish people have always created our own rules for how we believe a society should live together. Though it is far from perfect, a community that is based on the core belief that we should treat each other the way that we would like to be treated is a community that I believe can withstand and stand up to the great injustices of the world.

It is so simple. And yet so powerful.

Fred Rogers used to say that, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" So this year, if you have not ever before, come be a helper. Whether it be volunteering to visit with the elderly, restack shelves at the food pantry, or sign up to be an advocate—this year, you can help and really make a difference.

So a story that I'm sure you have all heard before:

One day a man went to a village and all the people were hiding. There was a farmer that came and the man asked the farmer why everyone was hiding. The farmer said that all the people of the village were hungry and the children were weak. The man went to the lake and filled a pot with water. He added a stone to the pot full of water and brought it to the village. He put it on a fire to cook.

The farmer asked him what he was making. The man told him it was Stone Soup. The farmer said that he had never heard of Stone Soup and asked if he could have some. The man said, "of course, but it would taste so much better if I only had a potato to add." So the farmer gave him a potato. Along came another villager and he asked the man what he was making. The man said it was Stone Soup. The villager said that he had never heard of Stone Soup and asked if he could have some. The man said, "of course, but it would taste so much better if I only had some beans to add." The villager came back with a handful of beans and added it to the soup.

A woman came along and asked what the man was making. He said he was making Stone Soup. The woman asked if she could have some. The man said, "of course, but it would taste so much better if I only had an onion," so she added her onion to the soup. All the people in the village started to smell the stone soup and came to see what the man was cooking. They all added their vegetables to the soup. Some carrots. Some celery. A radish.

After a while, the soup pot was filled with many wonderful flavors and the entire village had a feast. A villager elder offered the stranger a great deal of money for the magic stone, but he refused to sell it and traveled on the next day. As he left, the stranger came upon a group of village children standing near the road. He gave the silken bag containing the stone to the youngest child, whispering to a group, “It was not the stone, but the villagers that had performed the magic.”⁴

By working together, with everyone contributing what they can, we can achieve a greater good. And it doesn't take much: A potato. An onion. A smile. A hug. In the 50 years since Mister Rogers debuted, it is clear that part of the appeal of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood remains that his neighborhood could be any neighborhood. It could be a small village or a big town or the Upper West Side of Manhattan. When I think of the world that I want for all of us, the world that I want my children to grow up in, I think of a world that Mister Rogers would be proud of.

A world that is built on love and not hate; a world that is built on respect and not distrust; a world where the things that keep us together are greater than the ideas that set us apart. I believe in all of us and the power that we have to make this world a better place.

Happy new year.

⁴ Adapted from Aesop's Fables, Stone Soup