

Fred Rogers – Kindness in America, Kol Nidre 2018

In the spring of 1968, when a children’s program, “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood” debuted on public television, I was seven years old, and much too cool and sophisticated to be caught watching a show whose target audience was small children. I simply would not watch a milquetoast, cardigan-wearing middle-aged man who spoke to the camera in calm and measured tones. On our school playground – the functional equivalent of today’s “water cooler” – I daresay no one was discussing what they saw the day before on Mister Rogers.

And yet, hiding in plain sight, “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood” became a mainstay of children’s public television. Over the course of decades, young children – and their parents – were all welcomed to the neighborhood by its modest host and creator, Fred Rogers. As the show’s producer said, in the surprise hit documentary, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor,” Fred Rogers took every principle of what was considered good television and then did the opposite. Using primitive production values, simple hand puppets, quiet voices, and even moments of silence, the neighborhood offered children an alternative, gentle rhythm; there were no superheroes to save the day, no laughter at someone else’s expense. In Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood, the

adults - and the puppets they voiced - talked about their feelings; why they felt joyful or safe, or sometimes hurt or vulnerable. He sang simple, direct songs – with almost no melody so that every child could sing them – with titles like “I Like You as You Are,” and “Won’t You Be My Neighbor” - whose themes were love, acceptance, security, and inclusion.

Rogers' measured tones and genteel manners also provided a distinct cultural counterpoint to the spring of 1968, a time of extraordinary division and upheaval. As youth and hippie culture flourished, casting aside the bland formality of the 1950's, Mr. Rogers was a “square” with a cardigan and a tie. As the nation bitterly tore itself apart over the Vietnam War, urban riots, and college campus protests, Rogers’ preached – and practiced for 35 years – the famous words of Leviticus 19: 18 – the verse that is found in the direct center of our Torah: *‘V’ahavta L’rayachah kamoachah,* “Love your neighbor [as you would] love yourself.” His message of radical inclusion - in Reform Judaism today we call it audacious hospitality - is a message that should resonate with us today.

Why didn't he just call the program, "Rogers and Friends?" Or more conventionally, "The Fred Rogers Show?" After all, he was the program's creator, its star, its writer, its composer, and the voices of the puppets. It was,

literally, his show. First, as a matter of character and sensibility, he was much too modest and self-effacing to make the show about him.

But second, and more importantly, Fred Rogers - the man who first worked in commercial television for several years before leaving, because he was personally uncomfortable with its emphasis on advertising and money; the man who then went to seminary to become an ordained Presbyterian minister - wanted to create a neighborhood - a place with a particular rhythm and routine; a place where familiar rituals were followed; a place where people knew each other and stopped to chat; a place where cares and concerns might be shared. Fred Rogers wasn't just producing a children's television show. He was creating - and then modeling for both young children and their parents - what a caring community - a neighborhood - might look like - a place where people were kind to each other, a place where people genuinely loved their neighbor.

Yet Mister Rogers' neighborhood was never a simple place, or even a child's place. It was a place where someone could feel angry and insecure. a place where doubts and fears were not easily resolved, a place where loss, regret, and even death were part of the neighborhood. The themes of his neighborhood were the same ones all of us face on a daily basis, the ones we

confront on this day of reckoning and atonement: am I capable of being loved? Will I be able to forgive myself? Will my loved ones forgive me when I behave selfishly? And if my loved ones do forgive me, will it be genuine - or will they forgive me because, in the long run, it's just easier to move on? It's true, the intended audience may have been children, but the neighborhood was about all of us.

And that's what's so challenging about the Torah's command to love your neighbor, because it doesn't just say to love your neighbor. It says to love your neighbor as you would love yourself. But what if you don't love yourself? What if you don't believe your neighbor could love you? What if - even when you're able to confide in your best, most trusted neighbor, your pain, and your doubt, is simply too profound? What happens then?

What happens then - even in the best of neighborhoods - is the human condition. The ambiguous, often muddled, narrative of life. And Rogers' neighborhood never shied away from those moments. Early in the show's run, right after the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, Rogers talked about - in a way that a child might understand - the sense of loss and fear that defined the times. He created special programs on divorce, death, the first walk on the moon, and when the Challenger space shuttle exploded. Indeed, contrary to

the myths propagated by both the show's supporters and detractors, Mr. Rogers' programs often delved into the most unsettling of subjects, including the host's own personal demons.

The on screen Mr. Rogers - the soft-spoken man with the cardigan and the tie - was hardly perfect. He grew up as an affluent, sickly child who often stood apart from his classmates and had trouble making friends. He had - as we all do - fears and anxieties that he was working through, and often his hand puppets, in particular, the timid, thoughtful Daniel Strip-ed Tiger were stand-ins for his own insecurities (thank Elaine Sandy and hold up the T-shirt).

In a moving excerpt from the documentary, we see Daniel asking one of the cast members, Lady Aberlin, if she thinks he is a mistake. Daniel expresses his fear that he feels alone in the world and that no one will ever really love him. Lady Aberlin assures Daniel that he's not a mistake, but despite her best efforts, he doesn't really believe her. Here, Rogers touches the darkest parts of our soul and expresses our most painful doubts: where do I belong? Will anyone ever love me? Will this sadness ever go away? He knows that even in his idealized neighborhood, not every bad feeling can be allayed.

And yet, even though Daniel still feels lost and uncertain, he knows that in his neighborhood, he can share his pain with someone else, and that someone else has heard his voice. In the neighborhood, even if we can't solve a problem, we can listen, we can reach out, we can visit, we can send a note, we can shake a hand, we can offer a hug; we can be present, in friendship and kindness.

And it led me to this thought: what if our neighborhood - the place where people know us and we care for each other - is actually the synagogue? What if the place where Jewish values - kindness, love, and justice - are transmitted, is also the same place where Jewish values are practiced? And what if the most important Jewish value - the one we model for our children and grandchildren, the one we practice more than any other at Temple Beth-El - is *chesed* - loving kindness for each other?

There is so much that happens over the course of a day, or a week, or a year at Beth-El. In religious school, where the next generation is learning about their Jewish identity, and how to ask why; in our daily, weekly, and holiday services; in life cycle ceremonies that define and frame our members' most important Jewish moments; in adult education, Torah study, Sisterhood

and Brotherhood programs, and a myriad of unique cultural and academic programs.

And yet, even with all that happens here, what matters most - the overarching quality that informs and shapes everything we do - the quality that Rabbi Gutterman modeled for us for more than four decades - in both personality and in deeds - is *chesed* - decency and kindness. Whether in joy and celebration, sadness and despair, and every emotion in between, Judaism - more than anything else - means that we must care for one another through acts of kindness.

These days, Jewish professionals and academics devote their lives to analyzing the decline of the synagogue. From assimilation to the decline of anti-Semitism, from "young Jews don't join" to the overall decline in civic engagement, the synagogue as an institution has been on a death watch since the late 1970's. But what ministers like Fred Rogers and rabbis like Les Gutterman intuitively understood is that shepherding, and being part of, a caring community, a community of kindness, is exactly what it means to practice religious values. As Rabbi Shai Held recently wrote in his new Torah commentary, "at the heart of Torah is *chesed*, and that when all is said and done, religion is, in large part, about softening our hearts and learning to

care." Here at Beth-El, we have known what it means to be religious for decades. Indeed, our entire community - the clergy, the staff, all of you who are here, and all of you who are not here - serve as ambassadors of *chesed*, of caring and supporting each other through life's most significant moments.

On Rosh Hashanah, my sermon began with a story about removing a hedge from our yard, a hedge that served as a metaphor for the barriers that separate us from our neighbors. But such barriers are not only physical; we also build psychic and emotional barriers, barriers we build with the onset of adulthood, the ones we use to thicken our hearts, the ones that enable us to be cool, and distant, and insulated from life's pain and disappointment.

Maybe the reason "Won't You Be My Neighbor" has been such a smash - it's the highest grossing documentary film in many years - is because we long for Mr. Rogers: a public figure who didn't believe in such barriers, whose heart remained open, who steadfastly refused to dismiss - or condescend - to a child's emotions just because they were expressed by a child. When Rogers, looked into the eyes of a child, he didn't just see a child; he saw a vulnerable neighbor in need of love and acceptance.

My friends, we are living through a deeply jaded, cynical period; a time when every public deed or utterance is subjected to skepticism and scrutiny.

Genuine goodness - at least in the public square - appears to be in short supply. Fred Rogers may have died in 2003, but his voice, his character, and his message lives on and serves as a reminder that we can rise above the plague of cynicism and forge a different path. With every hand he shook, every hug he gave, and every kind word he spoke, Rogers demonstrated how *chesed* can change the world. May we follow his example - and the example of our rabbis, who taught us - especially on this day - that our lives will never be measured by our wealth or status; rather, they will be measured by our kindness to our neighbors who needed it most; the lost, the vulnerable, and the strangers in our midst. Together, let us build a world with kindness.