

**Mr. Rogers' Torah of Love**  
**Rosh HaShanah 5779**  
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The door opens, a head pops in. The hair is grey, the eyes shine bright, the mouth curls into a smile, and the soft voice begins to sing: "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor; would you be mine? Could you be mine?"

A generation of Americans was treated to a stroll down memory lane this summer with the release of the acclaimed Fred Rogers documentary, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?". I'm sure many of you saw it, and I hope you brought your tissues. For those who haven't seen it yet, I think you'll be able to enjoy it even after this teaching. The film delves into the genesis of the show *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* and makes explicit the messages that Rogers communicated to children all over the country, with unending passion and deep compassion. His wife and sons are interviewed, plus several of his television colleagues who have clearly become a second family.

You may know that Fred Rogers was, in addition to his career on TV, an ordained Presbyterian minister. The film details that young Fred was all prepared to head off to seminary in his hometown of Pittsburgh when he caught wind of this new-fangled thing called television, and realized immediately that it could be a powerful tool for communicating with audiences across the United States. He postponed his seminary studies until the show was well under way. He eventually completed his ordination but

never served a traditional pulpit. Nor did he ever preach explicitly Christian teachings. No, his congregation was spread out around the country, visible only through the camera lens; and he had a simple message: pure, unadulterated, unfiltered... love.

I remember watching *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* as a child--I think it was on right after *Sesame Street*--but I honestly can't recall much beyond his graceful entrance, changing from the suit jacket and dress shoes to the sweater and canvas sneakers, and the trolley to the Land of Make Believe. As an adult, peering into the philosophical underpinnings of the series, I am blown away by Mr. Rogers' sense of purpose and his indefatigable drive to teach every single child--*every single one*--that they are special and loved.

It is undeniable that the lessons Mr. Rogers conveyed--are as essential for each of us today--children *and* adults--as they were for those who sat in front of their big boxy TVs in the 70s, 80s, and 90s, glued to the screen for 30 minutes each week. On this Rosh HaShanah, a time of returning to and striving for ideals, we *need* to be open to the teachings of our tradition that remind us, time and again, of our unique worth in this world.

One of the clearest traits of Mr. Rogers himself and, in turn, of his program, is his unfailing interest in every person--child or adult. Mr. Rogers is curious about your likes and dislikes, your feelings, your opinions. The real-life adults on his program and all of his make-believe friends also express this value. Of course, this was essential for the children watching his program--they were

learning 2 major lessons: 1) that their thoughts and feelings mattered; and 2) that it was good to be curious about the thoughts and feelings of other people. Curiosity leads naturally to conversation and, eventually, to nurturing relationships.

At the root of his curiosity in every human being was the recognition that all human development depends on love. He famously said: "Love is at the root of everything--all learning, all parenting, all relationships--love or the lack of it." No doubt you recognize his motto, spoken directly to his viewers at the end of his programs (say it with me): *"You make every day a special day just by being you, and I like you just the way you are."* I am hard-pressed to find a better expression of unconditional love anywhere.

Our tradition, of course, agrees. There's nothing more important than recognizing, appreciating, and loving the unique character of every individual. In fact, we even have a Talmudic disagreement about which Torah verse expresses it better!

About 2000 years ago, 2 Sages--Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai--were having a conversation about the core message of the Torah. It's recorded in the Sifra<sup>1</sup>, the midrash to the book of Leviticus. Rabbi Akiva, the famous 2nd-century Sage, asserts that the verse, *וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעִי כָמוֹךָ*<sup>2</sup>, "love your neighbor as yourself", is THE core of the entire Torah. Sounds pretty good, right?

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<sup>1</sup> Sifra Kedoshim, Chapter 4:12.

<sup>2</sup> Lev. 19:18

Ben Azzai disagreed.<sup>3</sup> זה ספר תולדות האדם, “These are the generations of Adam” is the most essential verse in the Torah, he argued. This verse introduces one of the genealogical lists in the book of Genesis--aka “the begats”.

It’s fascinating that anyone would point to “the begats” as essential, and it begs us to try to understand why. Maharat Ruth Balinsky Friedman offers one idea: While “love your neighbor as yourself” uses our self-love as motivation for relating to other human beings in love, “the begats” locate that motivation elsewhere--in the divine image within each and every human being born into the world. Viewed in this light, every single name mentioned in “the generations of Adam” is a reflection of God Godself, and therefore sacred, worthy of respect and love--the same as each of us.

I wouldn’t dare to arbitrate between 2 giants like Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai; instead, I’ll say “yes” to both of their points. Yes, “love your neighbor as yourself” is the most essential verse in the Torah. And yes, each person listed in each genealogy is created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in God’s image, and that, too, is the most essential idea in the Torah. Both of them raise up the Jewish core value of respecting and loving each and every human being.

In our tradition, these values have implications for every aspect of life: They affect how we relate to all individuals, regardless of faith; they affect how teachers relate to students; they affect the way we relate to the stranger in our midst; they affect how we are to relate to the people we meet in the course of

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<sup>3</sup> Gen. 5:1

a day. And, yes, they affect the way we relate to the people we love most in this world.

Each of us, created *b'tzelem Elohim*, deserves to be loved for exactly who we are. We deserve to be the object of curiosity, because we have unique thoughts and feelings which have the potential to effect positive change in the world. We yearn for companionship and friendship and love, and each of us deserves these things. In turn, we are commanded as Jews to offer these things to our fellow human beings. We must listen with empathy, be curious, and seek out the sacred spark in every individual. It's not necessarily easy to do, but it's our sacred calling.

In addition to celebrating Mr. Rogers' message of love for each person, the documentary goes into great detail about Fred Rogers' dogged commitment to nonviolence education. He was broadcasting to a generation of children who witnessed the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, who experienced the Vietnam war. Rogers boldly took on these topics, carefully selecting the words, tone, and presentation he would use to communicate complex and difficult ideas to his audience. He went to great lengths to teach children that it was good to articulate their feelings, especially the sad or angry ones. He believed that this method would lead to a much healthier society than one in which feelings left to fester would eventually boil over in violence. Mr. Rogers was always, in a word, empathetic. Through this approach, he demonstrated successfully that conversation was always possible, as long as it made room for the child to react.

This teaching is as crucial for us today, as adults, as it was for the children who watched his program. Indeed, I've always wondered why we stop placing such an emphasis on *derech erez*--*menschy*, positive interactions--once our children reach a certain age. Visit any preschool or Kindergarten, and the students are practicing sharing, empathy, apologizing for wrongdoing, and using their words to express frustration and anger. Although a class in empathy might not be suitable for 7th graders, high school seniors, or adults, *something* gets lost along the way. Somewhere, we learn different lessons than we were originally taught--lessons that encourage insensitive comments, condone outbursts, even egg on physical confrontation. We know how hurtful these can be for the object or objects of such negativity. Just as troubling is the potential domino effect such interactions. I am sure that each of us can recall a time when we felt offended, and rather than talk it out, we lashed out at someone else. It's completely normal behavior; and yet it has the potential to snowball. Instead, we can endeavor to work through our anger, rather than let it overtake us.

Needless to say, taken to its very extreme, this message can be the very difference between death and life. On this day when we confront the reality that people will indeed die this year--who by fire? Who by water? Who in the fullness of years, and who too soon?--we must commit to living as our most empathetic and compassionate selves. Even when it takes time we don't think we have, we can pick up the phone to check on someone who didn't show up; we can be the listening ear when someone needs to vent; and we can trust

that someone else will be there for us if and when we need it. Small interactions can and do make the difference.

The documentary focuses on one other foundational value of Mr. Rogers' program which is as relevant today as it was then, and that is the promotion of racial equality. You will recall that *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* included a friendly African-American police officer who was also Mr. Rogers' dear friend, Officer Clemmons. Francois Clemmons was renowned as a singer in this country when Rogers invited him to take on the role of the neighborhood police officer, and he wasn't sure about it at first. In doing so, he became one of the first African-Americans to play a steady role on a television show. In the film, Clemmons recalls feeling extremely moved when Rogers invited him to cool off on a hot day by washing his feet in Rogers' kiddie pool. This was no ordinary sign of friendship; this now iconic gesture took place at a time when African-Americans were still regularly chased away from public pools and humiliated. Not only did Mr. Rogers share his pool with Officer Clemmons; he dried his friend's feet himself.

Friends, I would like to think that the embrace of racial equality--or more broadly, universal equality--would not be a necessary lesson for today. But our country continues to struggle with ensuring equal protection under our laws for not only for African-Americans, but for Latinos, LGBTQ individuals, women, non-traditional families, and anyone else considered "different". How many of us--most of us born into lives of white privilege--can imagine the conversations taking place in the homes of minority families?

I know I have not needed to consider what I would do if I were pulled over for racial profiling. And thank God, I've rarely been the victim or target of gender bias.

What must it be like for our African-American brothers and sisters teaching their children how to react if and when they're pulled over, or stopped on the sidewalk, or faced with a gun. What must it be like to walk through life as a gay man or a lesbian woman, a transgender individual? Our country and our world have made great strides toward equality under the law, but as long as LGBTQ individuals are considered "different", we still have a ways to go. Add to that the coalescing of too many Americans who believe--somehow--that white Americans are truly better than Americans of any other race, and it's almost impossible to believe we're living in the 21st century. Whether today's persecution is as expressed as blatantly as Charlottesville or the Pulse Night Club in Miami, or as subtly as many housing and education systems disenfranchising minorities, we must be reminded of that image of 2 men, brothers, cooling their feet in a simple kiddie pool. They are part of the biblical "generations of Adam"; we all are. Our country can and must work to achieve the equality all Americans deserve. Mr. Rogers was hard at work broadcasting that message beginning in 1968; now it's our turn, and 5779 can be the year when each of us makes a difference.

Mr. Rogers and his lessons, his teachings, his values, his *Torah* of love, nonviolence, and true equality influenced generations of Americans, and this year's documentary concretizes his lasting legacy. His Torah is not a thing of the past; it is as relevant and essential as ever.



On this day of recalibration, of *raising* the standards for ourselves rather than lowering the bar, we must reflect on our own attitudes and behaviors. How do we approach the other--in our family, at work, in public? Do we seek out the divine spark in each person, or have we perhaps ignored it on occasion? Have we refused to stand idly by when someone's divine spark is threatened? Or have we turned the other way in feigned ignorance? Today, we can and must recommit ourselves to an attitude of loving our neighbors, just the way they are.

In 2001, years after he'd retired and just after 9/11, Fred Rogers was asked to produce a short PSA of comfort and hope. There is video footage of him sitting at his piano, head heavy in his hands, struggling to find something--*anything*--that he could say that would be meaningful to us in the wake of such tragedy and trauma. Finally, he turned to the camera and said, very simply: "We are all called to be 'Tikkun Olam,' repairers of creation." That's the bottom line for us Jews, each and every day.

Sadly, the world lost Mr. Rogers in 2003. His Torah was a gift to so many across our country, and we are in desperate need of it today. Today a new year begins, and with it comes a world of possibility. *Halevai*--wouldn't it be incredible if each of us had a person like that in our lives? In the meantime, for this new year and beyond, each one of us might be that person for everyone we meet. Would you? Could you? Won't you be...?