

## **Won't You Be My Neighbor?**

**Erev Rosh Hashanah 5780**

**Rabbi PJ Schwartz**

[interlude – Mister Rogers' Neighborhood theme song]

Hello, neighbor. For thirty years, ordained minister Fred Rogers walked through the door of his television home, opened his closet, and replaced his coat with a colorful cardigan sweater. He took off his good shoes and slid on his sneakers, ready to share with viewers, his neighbors, the magical Neighborhood of Make Believe and teach us important life lessons.

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood never shied away from the trials and tribulations facing the world. His first episodes responded to the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. Mister Rogers took a stand against segregation when he invited Officer Clemmons to join him and cool his feet in a small plastic wading pool. He invited Jeff Erlanger, a boy with paraplegia, to speak about his life in a wheelchair and his injury, challenging stigmas around disabilities. During the Cold War, he aired episodes called the "conflict series," which explored issues like the accumulation of weapons, and the ideas that drive leaders to war in the first place. And for his farewell message, he called upon us on the first anniversary of 9/11 to assure children that we would do everything to keep them safe and help them express their feelings in ways that would bring healing to the world.

Rogers's ministry of public television was filled with teachings about kindness, compassion, and humanity's intrinsic worth. At the core, though, Fred Rogers's philosophy was about love.

He taught us that to love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is. He spoke about how deep within us, no matter who we are, we all want to be loveable and the kind of people that others want to be with. The greatest thing we can do, then, is to let people know that they are loved, and that they are capable of loving.

On this eve of the New Year, the sounds of the shofar call us to do just that: let people know that they are loved, and that they are capable of loving.

Judaism is a religion of love. It was Rabbi Akiva who argued that the most important principle of Torah is: "Love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18)." And the Ba'al Shem Tov, the great 18th century rabbi who founded Hasidism, taught that the most important thing we can do, even before loving God, is to love one another.

But for Mister Rogers, the commandment is not simply for us to love our neighbors as ourselves, nor even for us to love our neighbors and to love ourselves. He insisted that loving ourselves is the basis of loving others, for if we don't love ourselves, then loving our neighbor will be meaningless.

Loving ourselves is the first step *in order* for us to have the capacity to love others. For loving ourselves is no easy task. Many times, we wonder whether if practicing self-love is too selfish and too self-serving. Often it seems easier to attend to the needs of everyone but ourselves. The person we see in the mirror each morning has blemishes and imperfections that we would prefer to ignore.

The theme of this season is turning inward, engaging in the process of *teshuvah*. In order to do that we must develop an appreciation of ourselves and thus find the strength to embrace our internal struggle.

For this, our patriarch Jacob can be our model. Jacob, who had fled from home after he stole his brother Esau's birthright, wrestled with a mysterious figure one evening on his way to return home. It is unclear as to whom Jacob's opponent was as we are told that Jacob was left all alone. The interpretation that resonates most with me is that Jacob's wrestling match with the stranger was in fact a battle against his worst enemy: himself.

Jacob became a new man that night, so much so that he becomes *Yisrael* – one who wrestles with God. As Jacob wrestled with the stranger, he was participating in his own process of *teshuvah* and emerged accepting his flaws and overcoming his failings. This was a divine struggle that helped him find the sparks of holiness within himself.

In order for us to forgive ourselves for our actions, we must be able to accept that, as Ernest Kurtz notes, "to be human is to be broken and ache for wholeness, to hurt and to try to find a way to healing through hurt." To love one's self is to be honest with ourselves and with others.

Mister Rogers stressed that "One of the greatest gifts you can give anybody is the gift of your honest self." Our honest self is vulnerable, exposed, and authentic. And while our honest self is not always our best self, it is what can allow us to fail forward, embrace our mistakes, and connect with others. Martin Buber, the 20th century philosopher-theologian suggested that every encounter we have with each other has the potential of being sacred. So, too, Mister Rogers taught us that, "in the perspective of infinity, our differences are miniscule. We are

intimately related. May we never even pretend that we are not.” When we encounter each person as *b’tzelem Elohim*, the image of the divine, we value every encounter and see our commonalities.

Building relationships is an integral aspect of our congregational family and is central to how we show our love to each other. Mister Rogers wanted us to understand that being in community means that we must truly get to know each other, must give and receive, listen and share, and acknowledge and see our neighbor for who they truly are, just as we would want for ourselves. For us, to be in relationship to each other is to deliver new members *challot* on their first Shabbat after joining Shir Hadash or to bring handmade quilts to those who are ill or who are recovering from illness. It is the work we do with people of different races, faiths, gender identities, and status to fight injustice. To be in relationship to each other is to welcome guests at our services each week and join together in the singing of *Hinei Mah Tov*. It’s why we have thirty-something *havurot* that gather together regularly as an extended family and why we continue to be a pastoral congregation so that all are accounted for. These touch points are crucial to who we are as a congregation and who we are as a people.

Judaism teaches that all of us are valuable contributors to the whole precisely through our own individuality. Reform theologian Eugene Borowitz explains that each of our own involvements within a community are vital to the community’s covenantal existence. Our individuality is part of what we can contribute to the community. By being true to ourselves and bringing ourselves to others we are able to create authentic, covenantal relationships.

In the Torah’s description of the building of the *mishkan*, we find wisdom about community life. Each person brought a unique gift to the collective effort of building

the *mishkan*. Everyone contributed voluntarily, and the result was a beautiful and sacred whole. The beauty was precisely in the variety of the gifts. All of the gifts were unique, special, and valued.

I have seen this manifest itself over the past few months in the building of our newly renamed youth group, SALTY. Each student on the board brings something to the table, challenging his or her fellow board members to grow and develop as a leader. They know they have a voice not just among their peers, but with the congregation. They uniquely bring their own sense of soul and spirit into our congregational life. They chose a new name to reflect their desire to make something their own so that they could pave the way for a year of community building, social action, and living Jewishly. And even more so, the board has committed to each other to be radically transparent, to be honest and open with each other. As one of the teens put it, “We all have our stories. They make us, us. I need you to be part of my story to help me to be my best and bring my best self to the group.” This would indeed make Mister Rogers proud.

Let our teens be an example. Our congregational community is a place to learn the impact of relationships. To hear and be heard, to know and to be known. Where our personal stories become our collective stories. To live our best lives and what it has to offer. Together. If we don’t take the time now to recognize how special we are and what we can bring to our community, when will we?

Fred Rogers was a champion for what we find important as Jews and as human beings: kindness, compassion, and love. His messages about what it means to make mistakes, be kind to each other, contribute to the repairing of a broken world, and to love ourselves, are similarly

echoed by Hillel who said, “If am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” If we don’t feel good about ourselves and are not our own supporters, who will be? Only then can truly connect with each other, celebrate each other’s unique gifts, and bring ourselves fully into the world.

Mister Rogers ended each episode of his program by saying, “You’ve made this day a special day, by just you being you. There’s no person in the whole world like you, and I like you just the way you are.” And may the year to come be filled with reminders of just that: opportunities to be ourselves, to love ourselves, and to love others – just the way we are. [Sing] Would you be mine, could you be my, won’t you be my neighbor? *Shanah Tovah U’Metukah*.