

Kindness
Yom Kippur Morning 2019/5780
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It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood,

A beautiful day for a neighbor,

Would you be mine?

Could you be mine?

For those of you with a good synagogue memory, you may recall I started my Rosh Hashanah sermon back in 2013 with this same song. Then I spoke about welcoming to the neighborhood – for me as your new rabbi and our congregation to welcome each other. We were ahead of our time.

An excellent documentary on Mr. Rogers came out last year. The Tom Hanks starring film opens in November. The Mr. Rogers renaissance is now. And Fred Rogers has much to teach to us.

Mr. Rogers created a legacy of openness and acceptance in the 31 years of his children's television show. At the heart of his message was a biblical verse – Leviticus 19:18, "*V'ahavta L're'echa kamocho* - Love your neighbor as yourself."

"To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now," Mr. Rogers said. We're all familiar with that biblical verse, which Jesus and Hillel each made alternate versions famous. It is so well known, it is a Torah verse more commonly called by a nickname – The Golden Rule.

It is also full of complications. Each word of the phrase is open to widespread interpretation that some commentator has advocated across the generations. "Love your neighbor as yourself." What does "Love" mean? Is it a feeling or an action? Is it romantic love or friendly love or love for God? What does "neighbor" mean? Is it the people in our family, our personal community? Is it people who live near us, or

people like us in religion or country? How do we handle “yourself”? If I don’t like myself, can I treat others poorly too? Is it my version of love that matters or your version? It’s no wonder it took our Torah Study class 3 weeks just to get through these 3 Hebrew words.

It is clear that Mr. Rogers didn’t struggle over these issues. He created a neighborhood on his show that was open to everyone. Each person was welcomed for who they were and there was general understanding of kindness that everyone should receive.

“Deep down, we know what matters in this life is more than winning for ourselves,” he said. “What really matters is helping others win, too. Even if it means slowing down and changing our course now and again.” The importance is kindness.

In this Mr. Rogers renaissance, let’s face it. We could be kinder. That’s a maxim that we might want to carry into this new year. We could be kinder.

We do lots of things for people all day long. Is holding the door open for someone kindness? Sure. A small bit of it, but it still counts. Is donating a kidney to a stranger kind? That’s perhaps at the other end of the spectrum. Being kind has been defined as somebody who brings warmth and value to someone else with no expectation in return.

Kindness is a core belief in Judaism. *Gemilut Chasadim*, acts of lovingkindness, are at the center of Jewish behavior and how to live our life. The book of Proverbs teaches us, “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.”¹ Kindness is actually everywhere if just look for it.

Twitter is usually not a kind place. But sometimes something sneaks through. “My sister came home from school one day and asked me to take her to the library so she could get books on sign language. She said there was a new kid at school who was deaf and she wanted to be friends with him. [He looked like he needed a friend.] Today I stood beside her at their wedding, watching her sign ‘I do.’”²

Being kind clearly helps out someone else – the kindee if you will. But it also brings benefit to the one doing the kindness – the kind-er.

“Research by UCLA scientists already has shown that mindfulness and kindness actually alter the behavior of genes, turning down those that promote inflammation, which can lead to heart disease or certain cancers, and turning up the activity of genes that protect against infections.”³

But we are kind not because it helps us. In fact that is the antithesis of the motivation for being kind. We are a kind-er simply to help a kind-ee. Mr. Rogers taught us, “The real issue in life is not how many blessings we have, but what we do with our blessings. Some people have many blessings and hoard them. Some have few and give everything away.”

A meaningful act of kindness can tug at our heart. A few weeks ago, 8-year-old Christian Moore was ready for the first day of school in Wichita, Kansas. In the way that little kids can – and that we should learn from – he saw another boy crying in the corner. He went over, consoled him, and held his hand as they walked into school. A photo taken by Christian’s mother of the two boys became a viral sensation. What Christian didn’t know was that Connor was autistic and was overwhelmed by the big crowd. They became fast friends.⁴

We could be kinder, but we should be kinder. That’s a maxim for Yom Kippur. We should be kinder.

Howie Dittman went to the Pittsburgh Pride Parade this year. He wore a shirt that said, “Free Dad Hugs.” Expecting to put a smile on a few marchers faces, he, and his friend Deana, wearing a “Free Mom Hugs” shirt, found himself giving out scores of hugs to grateful marchers. Some were quite emotional such as the man who had been kicked out his home by his parents when he came out at 19. Howie received hundreds messages from marchers and from some parents after the Pride March. Some were even from parents who had be inspired to contact the children they had shunned. “How do even describe that?” he said. “How do you even describe the feeling that gives you?”⁵

We should be kinder. To our family, friends, and to strangers. Dr. Richard Carlson notes that most people make little eye contact with strangers and he finds a parallel between our attitude towards strangers and our overall level of happiness. “If you think of strangers,” he writes, “as being a little more like you and treat them not only with kindness and respect but with smiles and eye contact as well, you’ll probably notice some pretty nice changes in yourself...You’ll also notice how nice and grateful people can be when you’re the first one to reach out.”⁶ Remember that the Torah tells us 36 times to be kind to strangers.⁷

“In a place where no one’s acting human, strive to be human.”⁸ It is a harsh world out there. Our politicians, entertainment, social media, and, too often, each other teach people to be uncaring, distant, isolated, and selfish. We can’t change all that. But we can make a rough day a little better for a stranger by giving them our seat on the subway, by considering a legitimate reason why a driver who cuts you off might be in a hurry, or by treating each other with kindness, civility, and love. Even when things are challenging. Especially because our world is challenging. It is at times when someone is being the most difficult that they likely need the most kindness.

In 1991, Michael Weisser and his family moved from New York City to Lincoln, Nebraska so he could serve as the Cantor the local synagogue. On the day they moved in, the phone rang with the caller saying, “You’re going to be sorry you moved in, Jew boy,” and then hung up. The Weissers then received hate literature and threats from the Ku Klux Klan in the mail. The police identified the likely sender as Larry Trapp, the local Grand Dragon of the Nebraska KKK, who was also a double amputee having lost his legs to diabetes as a child.

Michael got Larry’s phone number and began leaving him messages like, *“Larry, there’s a lot of love out there. You’re not getting any of it. Don’t you want some?”*

He left messages every Thursday at 3pm. One time, Larry answered and screamed at him. Michael offered to give him a ride to the grocery store. Larry hung up. Michael kept leaving messages. One day Larry called Michael. “I want to get out of what I am doing and I don’t know how.” They met. Larry cried. He shared his terrible upbringing and a life of never having been loved. Amazingly, Michael offered Larry to come and live with him. Larry later converted to Judaism and stayed with Michael’s family until he died a year later.

As amazing as this story is, it is true. And it is about kindness even in a cruel world.⁹

We need to be kinder. The world needs it. You need it. You may not feel your kindness makes a difference, but Mother Teresa disagrees, “We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop.” Kindness mattered to Connor on his first day of school, to that person who needed a dad hug, and to Larry Trapp.

I asked people to share with me some stories of kindness. I was overwhelmed by reflections on moments of goodness and caring. Some were decades ago and still stood out clearly as a major moment in their life. Every story had actions that each of us could do. They were simple things done with the intention of supporting another person, sometimes anonymously, always because it helped someone else. Every one reminded us that it is actually easy to be kind and we need to be kinder.

Temple member Susan Grunberg reflected, “About ten years ago, in the early stages of my husband's illness (he has Parkinson's and dementia) I still felt I could leave him at home while I went to work, just checking in by phone a couple of times a day to remind him to take his medicine. But one day I came home to find a note on my door from a neighbor down the hall, who had recently moved in and whom I didn't know, telling me that my husband was in her apartment. I went there to find him drinking soda, chatting happily with a young woman who was showing him her family scrapbooks. She explained that my husband had come to her door apparently confused, looking for our apartment. She quickly decided that he should not be alone and invited him in. Then she managed to find out where he lived and left me the note. I thanked her for being so kind - especially when she could have easily responded with fear or annoyance. She explained that her father, in the last years of his life, had had Alzheimer's, and that she knew how difficult it could be.”

All it takes to be kinder is to notice someone else's needs. That means not focusing on ourselves especially now that we spend so much looking down at our phone instead of up at our world. That means sometimes taking a bold step.

My friend Karlee told me, “Many years ago, I was struggling as a single mom with 3 young daughters. We ate, but nothing special. To go out and buy an elaborate

meal for Thanksgiving was out of the question....pasta as usual for us. The day before Thanksgiving I heard a knock at my door. I opened the door and on my doorstep was a basket with a turkey and all the trimmings to be cooked. I cried and cried - I was never so grateful in my life. And I never found out who left it for us!”

This year, can you be a kind-er? Can you find some kindees? They are all around us. They are related to you. They are your friends. They are at work. They are in the synagogue. And they are every person on the street – looking for directions, having a terrible, terrible day, lost in the meanness of our times. Sometimes they’ll respond negatively to your kindness. New Yorkers don’t always react so well to kindness; we’re suspicious of it. Don’t be dissuaded. It might have more impact than you think. Sometimes you’ll be seen as the strange one – reaching out when so few do. Don’t let the coldness and cruelty around us be the model. A mean-spirited action or words carries with us through the rest of the day – or even throughout the years. Why not counter it with actions of kindness to be the model of behavior that can last a lifetime. And when you start doing it, you’ll want to do it more and more and being a kind-er will simply be who you are.

Christina worked in an independent bookstore back when we had bookstores.

She remembered, “In the middle of the day, this little old lady comes up. She’s lovably kooky. She effuses how much she loves the store and how she wishes she could spend more time in it.”

“OK. I think to myself. Awesomely happy, weird little old ladies are my favorite kind of customer. Then, this kid, who’s been up my counter a few times to gather his school textbooks, comes up in line behind her. She turns around to him and, out of nowhere, demands that he put his textbooks on the counter. He’s confused, but she explains that she’s going to buy his textbooks.”

“He goes sheetrock white. He refuses and adamantly insists that she can’t do that. It’s like \$400 worth of textbooks.”

“She, this tiny old woman, boldly takes them out of his hands, throws them on the counter and turns to me with an intense stare, and tells me to put them on her bill.”

“The kid at this point is practically in tears. He’s confused and shocked and grateful. She pays and asks me to please give the kid a few bags for his stuff. While I’m bagging up her merchandise, the kid hugs her, saying this makes such a difference in his life.

“We’re both telling her how amazing she is and what an awesome thing she’s done. She turns to both of us and says probably one of the most profound, unscripted things I’ve ever had someone say:”

“It’s important to be kind. You can’t know all the times that you’ve hurt people in tiny, significant ways. It’s easy to be cruel without meaning to be. There’s nothing you can do about that. But you can choose to be kind. Be kind.”¹⁰

We can be kind. We should be kind. Now more than ever we need to be kind. From our Torah we know, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Or remember the words of our model of kindness himself, Mr. Rogers:

“There are three ways to ultimate success:

The first way is to be kind.

The second way is to be kind.

The third way is to be kind.”¹¹

1 Proverbs 31:26

2 <https://twitter.com/TheStoriesDiary/status/1164904289413861376>

3 https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-09-24/ucla-bedari-kindness-institute-launch?fbclid=IwAR2EeZr4VXfbETtJ8uVsF_hc_YyYUoG3SCksID_b9BIQEGw6FI8WW6i2TQ

4 <https://patch.com/kansas/wichita/8-year-old-s-lesson-you-should-see-kid-s-kindness>

5 <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/laurenstrapagiel/free-dad-hugs-pride>

6 Richard Carlson, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, p. 67-68.

7 <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/ki-tavo/commandment-love-and-help-stranger>

8 Pirke Avot 2:5

9 [https://www.fridayfwd.com/love-](https://www.fridayfwd.com/love-hate/?fbclid=IwAR0CSE5Q6nhpGf35fLc6GvZ0k410MqsCduWIVJWWDPrARLtbmhjzNPndX4)

[hate/?fbclid=IwAR0CSE5Q6nhpGf35fLc6GvZ0k410MqsCduWIVJWWDPrARLtbmhjzNPndX4](https://www.fridayfwd.com/love-hate/?fbclid=IwAR0CSE5Q6nhpGf35fLc6GvZ0k410MqsCduWIVJWWDPrARLtbmhjzNPndX4)

10 <https://www.littlethings.com/lovably-kooky-old-lady/3>

11 <https://www.inc.com/geoffrey-james/45-quotes-from-mr-rogers-that-we-all-need-today.html>