

Won't You Be My Neighbor
 Rosh HaShanah Day 1
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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?
 Won't you be my neighbor?...
 Won't you please,
 Won't you please?
 Please won't you be my neighbor?

The moving documentary, *Won't you be my neighbor*, on Fred Roger's or better Mr. Rogers and his lessons, his legacy, his songs, his courageous moral voice, his imagination and his unconditional love and acceptance reminds each one of us the most important values in life. As we gather this new year, looking back on a year of blessing and a year of contention- a year of walls built up and families separated, and a year of cave walls broken through as the world joined together to save the Thai youth soccer team caught in the flooded caverns, our definition of neighborhood keeps expanding and shrinking- and as we mark a year of personal success, growth and achievement and personal struggles and difficulties- we certainly still have so much to learn from Mr. Rogers- one of my favorite childhood teachers.

Mr. Rogers was able to build a community over TV airwaves and teach that love is at the root of all. As a boy, Mr. Rogers had every imaginable childhood illness, he was overweight and bullied, and he had to entertain himself all alone when all he craved was community and acceptance. So he devoted his life to teaching others the importance of being part of a neighborhood- a safe and caring space where everyone could be accepted and appreciated. A place where everyone can learn to expect and accept mistakes. A place where everyone regardless of color or belief, sexual orientation or gender, age or intellect, could be welcome and valued. A place where everyone can grow and learn at their own pace.

Mr. Rogers lived the core teaching from our Torah- "Love your neighbor as you love yourself- v'ahavta l're'echa kamockha" the key lesson of the

Holiness code in Leviticus known simply as the golden rule- or as Rabbi Akiva described it- K'lal gadol- the essential message of our Jewish tradition- and as Hillel restated, "What is hateful to you, do not do onto others."

It was once said that the great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel remarked "love your neighbor as yourself is the hardest commandment, especially if you have a neighbor like mine!" In today's fractured world, we are more connected online but less connected face to face, we carry labels and identifications that create barriers instead of unifying us. When someone asks me "how can I connect?," more often than not, they are asking for our wifi code and not making a time for coffee or to an invitation for Shabbat dinner. We can all agree that loving our neighbor takes more work today.

The Torah certainly requires us to be good citizens- to care for all those in need- and to reach out to all those around us- from leaving the corners of our fields to feed the poor- to visiting the sick and home-bound. We are reminded again and again to welcome the stranger (36 times in the Torah) and accept everyone in our community. The Hebrew word for Neighborhood sh'kheina- is the same word for G-d- Shekhina- G-d's divine presence in our world- reminding us that we are all one people created and loved by G-d- and we must act in that same way- reaching out and caring for all- giving every individual proper kavod- respect. This of course was the hallmark of Abraham and Sarah who not only welcomed the stranger into their tent without walls which was the centerpiece of the neighborhood but they also argued with G-d to protect all peoples even in the corrupt Sodom and Gemorrah.

Within this most famous teaching- Love your neighbor as you love yourself, there are two levels of care expressed- there is the building of community with the recognition of the other (our neighbor) as Martin Buber taught in I and Thou- and there is also a focus on the self- for we are reminded that we always have to start our work at home and in the metaphorical mirror, we can't help others if we can't help ourselves. That's where teshuvah comes in.

The Kotzker Rebbe was asked by a student, "What does it mean to be a Jew?" The rabbi didn't answer keeping kosher, praying, going to Hebrew school or making Shabbos- he responded- "Arbeit nafshich, by working on yourself." One of our greatest failings is the belief that we are a finished product. So the student asks a second question, "So, who is a good Jew?"

The rebbe answers, “Anyone who wants to be.” According to the Kotzker Rebbe, a good Jew is a person that strives to grow and change each day and each year. We have to begin this year by loving and accepting ourselves but also pushing ourselves to improve and transform- not to simply accept our mistakes but to make amends and correct them. None of us are finished products. We are each free to change and break the bonds of who we were this past year.

It happened that on Rosh Hashanah morning, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev woke up with a spring in his step and proclaimed to all his students, “Today, I am going to change for the better.” He was a great rebbe and had many students who followed his words closely, modeled their actions by his. That morning, his students spoke back, “But Rebbe, you’ve said the same thing so many times, why should we believe it now?” Levi Yitzchak responded, “I may have said it every single day for the past year- but you know what- Today, I really mean it. This Rosh Hashanah, I am going to change for the better.” He refused to see himself as one who always failed. He saw each day as a new opportunity with the potential to change.

On Rosh HaShana, we blow the shofar for many reasons and maybe we blow 100 blasts because we have 100 interpretations. The classic understanding is to inspire each one of us to change our ways, through teshuvah- to seek forgiveness and make better choices, to incline our hearts up to G-d and seek to improve our lives. Perhaps this year, the shofar call is also a reminder waking us up to the task of creating a true neighborhood once again, pushing us to reach out to those around the block and across our larger community- to gain more understanding and trust. The shofar is a call for unity, a reminder that we are all one people- brothers and sisters- all created in the image of G-d, b’tzelem elokim.

Today, we no longer truly know each other. The neighborhood concept seems lost. There are so many divisions and walls that keep us apart and afraid. The shofar calls us to understand that being in community- there is a responsibility we share for each other- to truly get to know each other- and build a relationship- where we give and receive- listen and share- acknowledge and see our neighbor for who they truly are, just as we want for us. There is no us and them. We are all one people.

Too often, we dismiss the daily news reports of neighborhood shootings and violence, of addiction and overdose as not my business or it doesn’t affect

me. The reality is that it does and it happens here, too. We are so divided that we do not realize that our neighbors need us and we need them for they are a part of us. They can no longer be statistics. This morning's Torah reading tells the story of the expulsion of the handmaiden Hagar and her son Ishmael, no longer considered part of the neighborhood. When no one else provided for them, G-d stepped in and helped. They were abandoned by their community- they needed their neighbors. Imagine if someone stepped in to take responsibility and help? We need to join together to care for our neighbors and each other in order to move us from indifference to action.

The tekiah note is the unbroken, unified sound of combined strength with the power to break down walls- don't you remember Jericho?- to reach across aisles and city lines and even to get more involved in our own community and congregation. This past spring, we partnered with Trinity Cathedral and spent Shabbat downtown to participate in the March for Our Lives- joining the larger community to advocate for stricter gun legislation and safer schools. Together, we can achieve so much more than individuals alone- with a shared voice and shared values. The shofar blast calls to us:

Won't you please,
 Won't you please?
 Please won't you be my neighbor?

The Biblical Israelite camp of the desert was a true neighborhood so much so that when the prophet Bilaam was hired to curse the Jewish people- he stood on a hill above the camp and opened his mouth- he was overcome by the beauty of the neighborhood- how families cared for each other- they were united, protecting and supporting each other. Instead of offering a curse, he was moved to bless: Mah Tovu Ohalekha Yakov Mishkenotecha Yisrael- How good are your tents, how pleasant your neighborhood. Let it be that we each work to bring this blessing today for not only our shul but our entire community, all of Cleveland, our divided country and our world.

Loving your neighbor as yourself is no easy task. It might mean leaving your comfort zone or pushing your boundaries. I have started a year-long fellowship with Rabbis without Borders aimed at pushing my limits of understanding community and pluralism. This is a time for challenge and for change.

Mr. Rogers once tried to blow the shofar on camera while filming his show. He was a gifted musician but could not get out a single note. He turned to the camera and said, "Don't let anyone tell you it was easy, it was not." If we each strive to accept who we are and work on improving our ways, then we can better our community and help those throughout our neighborhood, too. As we celebrate our new year, the blessings in our lives and our community, let's ask ourselves these questions: What would Mr. Rogers do? What am I going to do better? Won't you be my neighbor?

For a short time, we did become one large global neighborhood this summer brought together by the boys soccer team found trapped in the flooded cave in Thailand. We were glued to our televisions and smart phones- sending prayers and strength to those boys and their families. Nations around the world sent top engineers, doctors, spelunkers and divers to assist the rescue efforts. After 18 days underground, we followed the near impossible miraculous escape of each of the boys and their coach- not knowing how to swim- traveling through miles of freezing underwater tunnels- guided by expert divers and navy seals- breathing the oxygen tanks placed earlier by divers risking their own lives to help these children they had never met. That's a neighborhood- those children were our children- there was care and attention- acceptance and appreciation. Joining together, miracles can happen.

Let's not let tragedy or calamity alone bring us together. Let's find ways to share our blessings and kindness with others and find opportunities to build new relationships in our shul, across greater Cleveland neighborhood and our global neighborhood. What would Mr. Rogers do? What am I going to do better? Won't you be my neighbor?

Shana Tova u'Metukah- and in that way- we can bring everyone including ourselves and our families a sweet, happy and healthy new year.