

Won't You Be My Neighbor

By Rabbi Michele B. Medwin
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Show: Video Clip of Mr. Rogers Intro

Earlier this summer I had the opportunity to see the movie, “Won't You Be My Neighbor.” It is a documentary about Mr. Rogers. I don't think I ever watched a whole show, perhaps snippets, as my kids watched. But I do know that he walked into a room at the beginning of each show, changed to a sweater and sneakers as he sang, “It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood.”

Mr. Rogers Neighborhood wasn't an exciting or flashy show, but it was a powerful show. In his calm, understated, understanding, and assuring manner, Mr. Rogers taught children how to live in a sometimes, confusing and scary world. As I was writing this sermon I asked my kids about watching the show when they were young. They shared with me that they learned the important messages of patience, creativity, using your imagination, and being kind.

Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister. Yet, many of his teachings echo Jewish teachings. I would like to share some of them with you this evening so we too can learn from Mr. Rogers as we begin our HH season. Genesis tells us, “We are created in the image of God.” (Gen. 1:27) Therefore every person is special and has a spark of the divine within them.

In his own way, he also shared that message with children. He himself was a fat, unpopular child. Based on his experience he wanted to let children know that it was OK to be different. He would say,

- “You are fine just the way you are...”
- You don't have to do anything sensational for people to love you...
- “You make every day a special day just by being you, and I like you just the way you are.”

Do you feel that you are fine the way you are? Or do you compare yourself to others trying to be more like them. Do you give your children and grandchildren the same message? “You are fine just the way you are.”

Do we treat others accepting them just the way they are? Our children? Our grandchildren? Our spouses, or significant others? And just as importantly, do we treat non-family that way, accepting everyone just as **they** are?

Mr. Rogers spoke to children but his words are important for us as adults to hear also. He talked about how much we can have an effect on other people without even realizing it. He would say:

- If you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet;
- There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person.”

As we enter the High Holy Day season we are intentionally critical of ourselves. It might be helpful to start off realizing how important you are to others in your life. Perhaps from that standpoint we will be better able to turn inwards to really do the important work of the *Yamim Noraim*, to see where we can improve.

I don't know how much Mr. Rogers knew about Yom Kippur, but he had important messages that resonate with us today related to this season. He taught that we **all** make mistakes and it is important to accept our mistakes and the mistakes of others, and go on. “Forgiveness is a strange thing,” he said. “It can sometimes be easier to forgive our enemies than our friends. It can be hardest of all to forgive people we love.” Who would you like to forgive this year? Who do you need to forgive so you can move on with your life?

It has been a rough year for many of us. Sometimes the challenges we have faced seemed overwhelming, made us feel sad, even depressed. Mr. Rogers also had advice here. He would say to children: “When we are feeling down, remember this.”

- “People have said, “Don't cry” for years and years, and all it has ever meant is, ‘I'm too uncomfortable when you show your feelings. Don't cry.’”
- I'd rather have them say, “Go ahead and cry. I'm here to be with you.”
- So go ahead and cry. Mr. Rogers gives you permission.

Can we use his words to better face the upcoming challenges we may experience this year? Can you cry and let them know you need them to be there for you? Can you say that to those you love, “Go ahead and cry. I am here for you.”

And of course, there is Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. We read over and over again in the Torah, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Lev. 19:18) and “There shall be one law for the citizen and for the **stranger** who dwells among you.” (Ex. 12:49)

Mr. Rogers not only helped children better understand themselves and be proud of who they are. He also had important social justice messages to teach. At the beginning of every show, Mr. Rogers began by inviting everyone to be his neighbor. He was welcoming of **everyone**. He taught by example. In 1968, just four years after the passing of the Civil Rights Act that ended legal discrimination, and in the same year as the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mr. Rogers cast François Clemmons, who was African American, as Officer Clemmons on his show. One year later, the program included a memorable scene in which Rogers was resting his feet in a kiddie pool, and he invited Clemmons to put his feet in as well. This act was viewed by many as an explicit gesture against racism during this difficult period of integration.

That same year, “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” had a visitor, 10-year-old Jeffrey, a quadriplegic. He showed Mr. Rogers his electric wheelchair and how it worked. Nearly a decade before the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, the segment helped children to feel comfortable with individuals with disabilities.

We could certainly use Mr. Roger’s kind but powerful words in today’s world, helping us to be more welcoming of people of color, those with disabilities, and anyone who is different than we are.

Mr. Rogers taught, “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.

Imagine what our neighborhoods, towns, states, country, and the world would be like if each and every one of us offered just one kind word to another person, once a day. As we look around our world today, instead of becoming more accepting of others who are different than us, the messages we are getting tell us to pit one against the other, to say “I am better than you.” That it is OK to carry Nazi Swastikas in the street and chant, “Jews won’t replace us.” That it is OK to make racist remarks about black people you don’t like. What happened to that wonderful welcoming invitation, “Won’t you be my neighbor?”

After 9/11 Mr. Rogers made a special TV show addressed to adults. He taught “We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It’s easy to say “It’s not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem... There are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes.”

He said, “We are called to “*Tikkun Olam*, to be repairers of creation.” Yes, he really did use those exact words. He offered, “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”

We are living in a very scary world. Are we the ones who are helping, or just the ones looking on? It is not enough, just to be kind yourself. We can’t just be complacent and accept such behavior. When you see people being mean and hateful to others it is a mitzvah, our obligation as Jews to speak up and say, “This is unacceptable!”

Boy, do we need a kinder world. Oh, how we need a Mr. Rogers today to help us all become repairers of creation. He has passed the torch onto the younger generation. Now it is our turn to say, “Won’t you be my neighbor.”