

Rosh Hashanah 5779
“Won’t you be my neighbor?”
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood,
A beautiful day for a neighbor.
Would you be mine?
Could you be mine?

I've always wanted to have a neighbor just like you.
I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.

So, let's make the most of this beautiful day.
Since we're together we might as well say:
Would you be mine?
Could you be mine?
Won't you be my neighbor?

Most of you recognize this as the opening of the Mister Rogers TV show, it was sung by its creator and star, Fred Rogers at the opening of each show during its run on PBS from 1968 to 2001. Of course he put on a sweater instead of a tallit – but kind of the same thing – no?

The Mr. Rogers Show was not part of my childhood. I was already at the end of my High School career when he began his run on PBS. But for a generation who are here today, in their late teens to mid 40's, Mr. Rogers was a part of your life. Mr. Rogers is back in the news as a result of an excellent documentary titled “Won’t you be my neighbor,” I hope you had a chance to see it over the summer. There is also a movie coming out that will star Tom Hanks as Fred Rogers. Why all of the interest in a children’s TV show and a man who died almost 15 years ago? As the movie’s director Marielle Heller said, “Because it’s a story for our times, a story about kindness and family connection and trying to tap into our better self and God knows we need that right now!”

Yes, we do. We live at a time and in a world that is in desperate need of a little more kindness and a little less meanness. I worry about how God must be so disappointed in us; this was not supposed to be the way we walked in His world – angry, afraid, cursing. Ours was not supposed to be the world of the angry fist, but the open and helping hand. How can I be so sure? The Bible tells me so.

There are a lot of laws in our Bible – but one that is repeated again and again is the obligation to be kind to the stranger! I counted some 25 times that the Bible insists on such kindness: Lev 19:34: “The stranger who resides among you shall be as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself – remember you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.” Ex. 12:49: “there shall be one law for you and for the stranger who dwells among you...” Deut 24:14: “You shall not oppress the stranger who resides in your towns or villages...” and on and on. In the Bible,

strangers are deserving of our kindness, compassion and concern.

This is not the popular message of our day. We are being told that people who are unlike us are sowing cultural chaos; they are undermining our way of life. The other, we are told, is the enemy; it is us, versus them and “they” are immigrants; “they” are people who speak strange languages and whose skin is darker than ours; “they” are people whose religion is not ours, whose heritage is not ours – “they” are illegal, “they” are a threat – “they” are our enemy. We are afraid of strangers, we distrust them; we teach our children not to speak to strangers – and the stranger the stranger – well the more reason to fear. And the circle of those deserving of our kindness keeps getting smaller and smaller.

No, our world is clearly not Mr. Rogers’s world, nor is it the vision of how the world should be as found in our sacred tradition. Mr. Rogers taught a generation of children to see everyone as your neighbor.

“Since we’re together we might as well say:
 Would you be mine?
 Could you be mine?
 Won’t you be my neighbor?”

And that is how our sacred tradition wants you to behave as well. The stranger, he/she is your neighbor and it is not us versus them but rather us *and* them. A generation of children sang Mr. Rogers song, but generation after generation of Jews have been singing our version of that same song. Here are its words in Hebrew: *V’ahavta L’reyecha k’mocha* - Show Love to your neighbor as you would show love to yourself (Lev 19:18)– love the other, love the one who is *not* you, the one who is so different than you. That’s what our Bible says, that people who are not like us are still worthy of respect and deserving of our kindness. (sing in Mr Rogers tune) *V’ahavta L’reyecha k’mocha*, won’t you be my neighbor?

Why the lionization of the late Senator John McCain, may his memory be for a blessing?

Of all the qualities in his remarkable life, his heroism, his tenacity, his dedication, the one that was most often spoken of during the recent tributes, was his decency. His death seems to have focused our attention on this most remarkable attribute of this very remarkable man. John McCain became our national *mentsch*, our *mentsch*-in-chief, if you will. Our sorrow and pain over his passing is revealing in that it speaks not only to the loss of a great man but the dying of an important value.

John McCain was not naïve to the ways of the world; he fought in a war, suffered and was tortured as a prisoner. And yet like so many who have seen the darker side of life, he emerged not bitter and angry but optimistic and hopeful. I have seen this often in Holocaust survivors, who suffered the worst depravities that mankind could devise, but did not lose their faith in goodness and their hope for a better tomorrow. Some of you are their children, the miraculous product of their ability to believe in a new beginning.

The Bible also knew the ways of the world, it speaks of war, violence, jealousy and anger. But, it always envisioned the possibility of a better world, a world of kindness. In Hebrew it is called

hesed. Although sometimes translated as kindness, it is much more than that.

In *Pirke Avot* we learn that “the world stands on three things: on the Torah, on the service to God and upon *hesed* – acts of loving-kindness. Along with God and Torah, kindness is foundational in Judaism.

Traditionally a husband sings *Eyshet Hayil* a rendition of Proverbs 31 to his wife every Friday night. Some 40 years ago when we were first married I told Edy I would like to observe this tradition and my feminist wife was not sure if this, arguably sexist ritual, was to her liking. Her mother gave her the following advice: “If your husband wants to sing your praises – let him.” Over the years other families have developed many variations on this custom, as numerous as the changes in our understanding of gender and sexuality, but for better or worse, on Friday night I am still singing *Eyshet Hayil* to Edy.

One of my favorite lines in that poem of praise and adoration is: *torat hesed al leshona*. According to our sacred tradition, the ultimate value of the ideal partner in a relationship, is one who has a torah of *hesed*, a torah of kindness on their lips. Note to anyone who is seeking a partner in life: kindness should be at the top of your list of qualities you offer and seek. Note to anyone already in a relationship: *torat hesed* - a little more kindness in the language we speak to one another is desperately needed.

This word, *hesed*, appears 245 times in our Bible (that alone should tell you something about its importance) and about two-thirds of these instances speak of God’s character and actions. When Moses descends from Mount Sinai with the tablets, God proclaims thirty-two words that have become known in our tradition as the Thirteen Attributes of God’s compassion. And one of these proclaims that God is *rav hesed* – abundant in *hesed*. The prophet Jeremiah declares: “I am God who does *hesed*, justice and righteousness, because in these I delight,” says God.”

And on and on it goes. God is the master of kindness and the world is built on kindness. In fact it was nothing but an act of *hesed* that God created the world at all. The starting point for the universe is nothing. In the scientific metaphor creation was an accident. In the Jewish metaphor creation was an act of kindness. There is nothing that required God to create the universe. There does not have to be anything. So the very fact that there is something is an act of Divine kindness. And if kindness is the source of all that is, the only reasonable response to such kindness is gratitude and imitation. This is the fundamental posture of a Jew, an attitude of gratitude and a desire to imitate God’s kindness by adding our own acts of kindness to the universe.

(Hold up shofar) This is the central symbol of this most important of holy days. In the Bible there is no reference to this holiday being called Rosh Hashanah – it is called *Yom HaZikaron* – The Day of Remembrance or *Yom Teruah* – the day of sounding the shofar. What are we supposed to remember and what does this most ancient of customs mean? Why do we do it? What is its message?

The shofar is a actually symbol of God’s kindness and we sound it on this day when we are in desperate need of God’s kindness.

The entire liturgy for these High Holy Days is based on the hope for and the need for God’s

kindness. We imagine these days as a time of accounting. On Yom Kippur we will beat our breast and recite a litany of sins – *Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu* – *We have sinned, we have betrayed, we have stolen and lied, we have been unkind.* And we tremble in fear, as we know we stand before a God of Justice, who could and very well may demand an accounting for all our unkindness.

The bible records that the original Rosh Hashanah looked nothing like our observance today. There of course was no synagogue, but there was also no prayer - - no Mahzor! All these hours upon hours of *davening* were a later invention. No, the original Rosh Hashanah was actually a rather simple affair: the entire people standing silently in the desert listening to the sounding of the shofar, (blow shofar)

That was it – that was Rosh Hashanah – now we can go home for lunch!

That moment, so long ago, as our ancestors stood on the desert plains, in rapt attention, silently listening to the sounding of the shofar, it required no explanation, no interpretation, no amplification. The medium was the message. Everyone heard and everyone understood. But with the passage of time, as we moved out of the desert and into the Land of Israel, we scattered to the four corners of the earth and 3200 years later, we sit here in Roslyn Heights, NY, and we need help to understand. We hear the *shofar*, but unlike our ancestors so long ago, its message is not obvious, not the way it was to them.

What do you hear when you hear the *shofar*? What should you hear when you hear the *shofar*?

(Blow shofar)

Get it? Do you understand? No? Not sure?

You see, there was a story that our ancestors knew that, well, many of us may have forgotten. If you know this story – then the *shofar*, as a symbol, is obvious. It is a story that happened to Abraham, the very first Jew and to his son Isaac. It is in the Bible, in fact, since the rabbis did not want us to forget this story they made it the torah reading for these days of Rosh Hashanah. But just in case any of you came to shul *after* the Torah reading, I will remind you. This may be what we are supposed to remember on this *Yom HaZikaron*, this Day of Remembrance.

The torah reading for Rosh Hashanah is the story of the binding of Isaac. Now, one of the problems of dealing with this story from the Torah, and why I hesitated to even mention it, is that whenever we confront it, most of us cannot get beyond the theological problems it presents. We are so outraged by the notion of a God who would demand of a father to sacrifice his son and of a father who would acquiesce, that it is hard to work through to the end of the story, which contains its real relevance to this holiday. Rabbis and scholars, students and sensitive souls throughout the ages have wrestled with this one section of the Torah probably more than any other single section in the entire Bible and I have no intention to minimize or interrupt that struggle that gets to the very core of what it means to be a person of faith, but, if I engage with you now in these issues I will never get to the end of the story and it is the end of the story that I need you to remember. There on top of that mountain, Abraham

standing with arm raised and knife poised, at that moment with Isaac looking up into the eyes of his father, with terror? With amazement? With sadness? With incredulity? At that moment God sends an angel - - "Abraham Abraham! Stop! Don't do it!"

"Look Abraham – let's try and get this right here at the very beginning of this enterprise ok?" (By the way this is my imagining of what I think took place at that moment)

"Abraham – you are the first Jew – and there lying bound before you is your son. You will be the father of a great nation, a story that will last for thousands of years begins today, right here, right now, and my dear beloved Abraham, this story, our story is NOT going to be one of murder and hate; it is not going to be one of vengeance and death, no we have a very different story to tell, and I want you to get it right from the very start: our story is one of kindness and compassion, of forgiveness and love. If you feel the need to show your love for me with a sacrifice, look over there in that bush and you will find a ram caught in the thicket. Offer it, if you must but not the boy, good God, not the boy!"

And that is why we sound the rams horn. The *shofar* is a reminder of that moment, the moment Judaism was truly founded. And it was to be founded as an act of kindness and compassion, and this became *Yom Teruah* – a day of kindness and compassion. Abraham thought that God wanted him to do the right thing, to follow His word, but God doesn't want Abraham to do the right thing, he wants him to do the kind thing.

And so we stand here on this day of accounting, and we are all Isaac, bound on the alter. We know we have sinned. We know we are wanting. We know we could have done so much better. And like Isaac we look up into the eyes of *Avinu Shebashamayim*, Our father in Heaven, and like Isaac we tremble, we are afraid, we are terrified. And then we hear the shofar – and we are reminded today, as Abraham was so long ago, that ours is a God of kindness.

What little we know of Abraham, we know that he got the message and learned the lesson.

Abraham becomes known as a man of kindness and compassion. In his dealings with his nephew Lot, in his dealings with the non-Jews who lived around him, all of his interactions are marked by kindness. Tradition says of *Avraham Avinu* that his tent was open on all four sides so that any stranger who approached would have easy access to his hospitality. And indeed when those strangers do approach, Abraham, according to our Bible, cannot do enough for them. He runs to get food and instructs those around him to similarly drop everything in the care of the stranger – the other.

I can almost imagine Abraham, running to provide for his guests. I wonder if as he rushed from his tent he was humming: "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood...Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won't you be my neighbor?" He probably sang it in the original Akkadian.

But, my friends, we are Abraham's children and his song, God's song, is one we desperately need to learn to sing today.

It won't be easy. Ours is a culture of nastiness. The meanness, the bullying, the coarseness, the narcissism, the profanity and incivility, the negativity – it really has to stop.

And to those who are going to say that the rabbi spoke out against our president in his High Holy Day sermon, I wish it were that simple to blame all of this on our president. But, politics has always been a nasty business and he is merely the apotheosis of so much that has preceded him. It is not just emanating from the White House.

I stand in line at Bagel Boss – the person in front of me steps to the counter and says: “Gimme a dozen assorted bagels...” “Gimme!” No please and certainly, no thank you.

A car doesn’t move forward the second the light turns green – and immediately the car behind begins honking their horn. Or someone does not turn right on red even though the sign says they may – and the driver of the car behind them - -cuts them off, giving them the finger.

Kids were being rude to Alexa, the virtual assistant created by Amazon, so Amazon is updating its software. In its free set of parental controls it has added a feature called: “The Magic Word.” If you activate this feature – and I strongly encourage all parents to do so - when your youngster asks Alexa to solve a math problem and exhibits good manners—“Alexa, *please* tell me what 5 plus 7 is”—the voice inside will not only supply the right answer but will then add positive reinforcement: “By the way, thanks for asking so nicely.”

When our president was asked about his lack of concern for civility, decorum and niceness – he replied: “I’m a modern day president and this is how people speak today...”

I think he is correct. I think this is how too many people behave and speak today but it does not mean that we need to do so tomorrow. 97% of Americans believe that it is important for our leaders to be civil.

100% of all rabbis think it is important that each of us be a *mentsch!*” We need a *torat hesed* – a torah of kindness on our lips.

Abraham Joshua Heschel once remarked – “When I was young I admired clever people; now that I am old, I admire kind people.” Kindness, *hesed*, is value #1 in Judaism.

A story. There are many versions of this story, attributed to many different rabbis, but all of them are a variation on the following: The rabbi in a small shtetl in Europe one Friday afternoon was approached by a poor woman who hurried into his study holding a chicken with a broken wing asking if it was kosher and could be slaughtered to feed her family for Shabbat. The rabbi looked and thought and then rendered his decision – the chicken was kosher! Happily, the woman departed and left behind some very puzzled students. One student finally got up enough nerve to say, “But rabbi, that chicken was clearly and obviously unfit, it was *treif* – how could you declare it kosher?” The rabbi smiled and replied. “Did you notice the woman’s torn dress, her desperate face? No, my dear students – you were busy looking at the chicken, I was looking at the woman! – She needed that chicken to feed her family – my job was to help her do so!”

That my friends, is the Torah of kindness we so desperately need. We have come to speak of Jews by dividing them into groups like: Conservative, Orthodox, Reform, Secular, Religious, Israeli, American, Habad, Zionist – those divisions no longer help me understand our world of Judaism.

We have come to divide Americans into Red States and Blue States, rural versus city dwellers, white collar versus blue collar – but these divisions do not help me understand the world of America. Tell me you are a secular Jew and I do not know very much about you. Tell me you are an Orthodox Jew and I still know little about you. They tell me nothing of importance about the kind of Jew you are. Tell me you are a Republican or a Democrat and I know nothing of the kind of person you are the kind of American you are. I suggest a much simpler system of classification. In my world, there are only two types of Jews and only two types of Americans: kind Jews and unkind Jews; kind Americans and unkind Americans. And it does not take a genius to figure out which group I want you to affiliate with.

Kind Jews of the world, unite! *V'ahavta L'reyecha K'mocha* – love your neighbor and embrace a Torah of kindness!

I truly believe that kind Orthodox, kind Reform, kind Conservative and kind Secular Jews have more in common with each other than they do with the unkind members in their own groups. Kind Republicans and kind Democrats, kind farmers and kind people on Wall Street, kind college educated and kind people who have never gone to college – they all have more in common with each other than they do with the unkind members of their own respective groups.

My friends, *vahavta l'reyecha k'mocha* – loving your neighbor, is not just about being nice. Behaviors such as aggression, anger, blaming, bullying, dishonesty, greed, narcissism, negativity, profanity and incivility are social contagions. This is not about good form, it is about the kind of people we are all becoming and the kind of society we are creating.

Go into any hospital or day care nursery and you will observe that when one baby cries, others soon wail. Or think of the last time you walked into a room and felt the tension in the air. How other's act affects us – and mood is just as infectious as the flu and with prolonged exposure, you are at greater risk. Even the simplest of tweets or video clips can influence our mood and our behavior. And when you think of the number of harsh tweets and video clips we and our children are being exposed to, the mockery that passes for too much of talk radio and cable news today, is it any wonder we are where we are?

The Rambam, Moses Maimonides who lived in 12th century North Africa teaches: Everything we do, every word we say, every act we perform, is either a *Kiddush Hashem*, a sanctification of God's Name or a *Hliul Hashem*, a desecration of the Holy Name. There are no neutral acts, only kindness and generosity or meanness and selfishness.

The Rambam also suggests that everything I do has implications far beyond my own reputation. The greater the person, the greater the responsibility. Here is what Maimonides wrote: “All the more so a person who is great in their learning and famous for their piety. If that person does deeds over which people might complain about him/her, they are considered a *hilul hashem*, a desecration of God's name. For example a person makes a purchase and does not pay on time and the sellers seek payment and he avoids them; or a person is a jokester and makes fun of others; or who eats and drinks in excess and encourages the uneducated; or speaks unkindly to others and does not deal with them with a kindly disposition, but rather is a person of quarrelsomeness and anger – all of this follows according to the greatness of the person: the greater the person, the more he/she needs to be precise and exacting with himself and beyond the letter of the law. So, if such a person speaks kindly

to others, taking their needs and feelings into account, treats people with a kind disposition; accepts but never gives insult; honors everyone even if they dishonor him; transacts business faithfully; limits the time he spends among the foolish; is always seen busy with Torah, wrapped in his *tallit* and wearing *tefillen*, and goes beyond the letter of the Law in all of his affairs such that all with praise him and love him and yearn to be like him – Behold he has sanctified the Name of God ... (Rambam- Laws of the Foundation of Torah, 5:11)

That was written 700 years ago!

700 years ago, the Rambam argued that everything we do, every act, every word, every gesture either elevates the world or diminishes it and that our leaders in all walks of life, must demonstrate a level of decency that is commensurate to their positions.

But I know you! I know what you are thinking right now. Some of you are going to come up to me after this sermon and say, “boy rabbi you really gave it to ‘em!” And whenever someone says this to me, I am never exactly sure who ‘em’ is. The only thing that is clear to me when they say this is that ‘em is not them.

“But rabbi, of course you were not speaking to me – in fact didn’t the Rambam clearly say he was referring to leaders of the community – the politicians, the clergy, the business leaders – I am not a leader, so it is not up to me – it is up to them to fix what is wrong with the world.”

Nice try. But you are “them.” You *are* the leaders, we are all leaders, every single one of us. Someone is looking up to you – it may be a child or a friend, or maybe if you are a teacher it is your students, or in business maybe it is your employees or fellow workers.

We are all leaders and it is time we starting acting like one.

We don’t need a revolution, we just need to start being kind to each other. And we have a right to demand kindness from others.

The next time you are having a disagreement with your spouse or your friend, or a co-worker – victory is not proving that you are right, but showing that you are kind.

The next time someone tells a joke that denigrates minorities or women, or any cheap shot just to get a laugh, it is no longer ok just to just think to yourself that this is not right, it is time to speak up and say that unkindness will no longer be accepted here. The next time someone speaks rudely to a salesperson make sure your children who are standing there know, that is now how we speak to others. And when politicians come to seek our votes, we can debate whether our country is best served by Republicans or Democrats, but there is no debate that it can only be served well by *mentschen* – in leadership character matters.

There is a sign on our front lawn here at TBS – I wish it were bigger, it states: “Hate has no home here!” It is written in several languages so everyone will understand what this place stands for: *Ki bayti bayt tefilah yikarey l’chol haamim* – “My House shall be a house of prayer for all people.”

When Mr. Rogers walked into his make believe home he put on his sweater. When a generation of children watched him do that simple act they knew they were being ushered into a world of warmth and caring and love.

When we walk into this house, we put on a *tallit*. It really is the same thing. In fact, I do it every day. Every day, first thing every morning – I wrap myself in my *tallit* and *tefillen*– and I feel the warmth and kindness and love it represents.

Maybe you could start there – get a *tallit*, if you don't already have one, and every morning wrap yourself in it, and just say the *Shma: Shma Yisrael* – Listen *Yidden* – *V'ahavta* - and love! Love God, love each other, love yourself – be kind.

That's all. It won't take you more than a minute. But, it could make all the difference in the world – it could certainly make all the difference in our world.

V'ahavta l'reyecha k'mocha –Hate has no home here - it is time to us to love our neighbors a little more, it is time for each of us, for all of us, to be a little kinder.

It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood,
A beautiful day for a neighbor.
Would you be mine?
Could you be mine?

Please won't you be my neighbor?