

Won't You Be My Neighbor?
Sermon for Rosh HaShanah – Day 2 – 5779
Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El

We all remember where we were that day. The memory is seared into our minds.

Some of us were at work, others at home; some of us were at school, I was...sailing. I was a freshman in college, and it was the second week of classes, and on Tuesdays I had a 9 am Spanish class, an 11 am English class, and in between I signed up for sailing. One of the benefits of going to school along the Charles River in Boston was that it was just a few minutes' walk from the Arts and Sciences Building to the sailing docks along the river's southern bank. As I bounded back into the School of Theology building at 11, I learned what had happened. "We are going to cancel class today, because of what is happening in Manhattan" our professor, Geoffrey Hill, said. And I distinctly remember my internal reaction: "What happened in Manhattan?" It was at that moment, just after 11 am, 2 hours and 20 minutes after American Airlines Flight 11 struck the North Tower, that I learned of the tragedy of 9/11. It was 17 years ago today, almost to the minute. As I think back on that morning, I feel like I might have been the last person in America to learn about what had happened. But for the rest of the day, and the days to come, I, like everyone else, was glued to the television.

That television belonged to a dorm-mate of mine; I didn't have my own. We had high-speed internet in our dorm, but the news outlets were not yet publishing video in real time. And so we sat, the 20 of us who lived at 175 Bay State Road, huddled around Chris' TV. I was 1000 miles away from my family. I was safe, but felt vulnerable, alone. In those moments, separated from my parents, siblings, and friends, I reached out to the closest set of people around me...in those days after 9/11, I reached out to my **neighbors**. We were 18 or 20 years old, and all of the sudden thrust into adulthood. With no one familiar around us, no one upon which we could rely, we relied on each other for calm and

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compassion, to vent our fears and share our anxieties. We grew up in those moments, but only were able to do so because of what we, as neighbors, did for each other.

We all have neighbors. On one hand, to be a neighbor is simply to be in a state of proximity. Unless you live in a rural area, intentionally removed from those around you, you have neighbors. On the other hand, the idea of being a neighbor can be something more, or even much, much more than just proximity. Being neighbor can be a heightened state of relationship, with responsibilities and expectations, with norms and mores, values and morals. Our biblical tradition calls upon us to be in deep relationship with our neighbors, as the words of Leviticus (19:18) exhort us to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” That feels like an incredibly tall order, but reflects an aspirational mindset that was probably best demonstrated by the great Fred Rogers on his television program *Mister Rogers Neighborhood*.

This past summer saw the release of *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, a documentary about Fred and the profound impact he had on so many people, myself included. I watched his program every day as a child, and delight as my girls enjoy both *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* and the 21st Century spinoff, *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*. In the documentary, Rogers' biographer Maxwell King noted that to Mr. Rogers, “a neighborhood was a place where, at times that you felt worried, scared, unsafe, would take care of you, would provide understanding, safety. That's what the neighborhood was for Fred” (*Won't You Be My Neighbor*, 11:53). To Mr. Rogers, love was the key, the root of all learning and all relationships. He was an evangelist for television, and his gospel was to love your neighbor and to love yourself. While we might not resonate with words like evangelist and gospel, since he was a Presbyterian minister, I think they work. In Fred's

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mind, everyone was a neighbor, and we have an opportunity to deepen our relationship with each and every neighbor we encounter.

Earlier this year, Yossi Klein Halevi, the American-born Israeli thought leader, published a new book, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*. Yossi, from Brooklyn, now lives in Jerusalem, in an area where just down the hill is a neighborhood that is predominantly inhabited by Israeli Arabs. He describes how each day they go about their lives, and rarely do they interact with one another. He opens with these words:

“Dear Neighbor, I call you ‘neighbor’ because I don’t know your name or anything personal about you. Given our circumstances, ‘neighbor’ may be too casual a word to describe our relationship. We are intruder in each other’s dreams, violators of each other’s sense of home. We are living incarnations of each other’s worst historical nightmares. Neighbors? But I don’t know how else to address you. I once believed that we would actually meet, and I am writing to you with the hope that we still might. I imagine you in your house somewhere on the next hill, just beyond my porch. We don’t know each other, but our lives are entwined. And so: neighbor” (Klein Halevi, p. 1).

Physically, they cannot be closer to one another, but spiritually, emotionally, and even socially, they could not be farther apart.

Israel has often been described as being in the “most dangerous neighborhood in the world,” and in opening his work Yossi seems to be both recognizing that presumption and challenging the self-fulfilling nature of it. Yossi find himself torn between his head and his heart. He isn’t a peacenik, he is an American-born, religious

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Zionist, right-leaning scholar and commentator. In his heart, he desires a modern Israel that stretches to the Jordan River and beyond, a place that Jews from all over the world can call their homeland and exercise their Judaism without the limits of compunction or fear. But with his head, he recognizes that another people have a similar desire for their own tradition and their own faith over the same square footage. So he finds himself looking at, and to, his neighbors with hopes for a peaceable solution, a change for co-existence. So many neighboring nations, states, and peoples throughout history have been able to put down their hatred for each other and find their way to peace. In our lifetimes we have seen conflicts in Vietnam, the former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, and Northern Ireland elevate from states of proximate hatred to neighborly peaceful coexistence. While in other circumstances we might desire for more than mere coexistence, with a historical record filled with violence, mere neighborly coexistence is accomplishment enough.

These neighbors, be they geographic, political, religious, or ideological, are going to be there whether we want them there or not. But as Junlei Li, co-director of the Fred Rogers Center, reflected, "The neighborhood is not a fantasy place, where everything was happily ever after; Diversity leads to conflict, real conflict." We have the opportunity to confront that conflict in whatever way we choose. We can continue to turn our backs, to castigate and criticize, with the false hopes that eventually these neighbors will go away. But we know better. We know that our task is not to turn away but to engage. Yossi tried to open a dialogue with his neighbors, even publishing his book in Arabic and making it available for free to anyone who wanted to read it. He challenged them, and challenges us, to engage with our neighbors whom we do not know. The challenge is that we should, at

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least momentarily, put down our parochial or tribal blinders and seek to understand what motivates our enemies, our opposition, those with whom we disagree, and with whom we interact regularly, so that in the future we might be able to fulfill the biblical aspiration of love for neighbor.

Most of our neighbors are people with whom we do have a relationship. These are the people we see near our homes, at the marketplace, at communal events. As children, many of us were invited to consider those people when we watched *Sesame Street*, and sang the song about the people in our neighborhood, the people that we meet when we're walking down the street each day. Some of them are close friends, others we don't know from Adam or Eve. But the mere fact that we live in the same place at the same time often means that we have certain things in common. Those commonalities can be socio-economic, cultural, or even religious. I recall my parents teaching me that, while moving during the winter is not something that Chicagoans like to do, the best time to looking for potential new homes is in December. At night, we would drive through neighborhoods that my parents were interested in. Why? If in December the neighborhood was all lit up with Christmas lights on every home, we knew that that might not be the neighborhood for us. But, if the neighborhood was ordinarily dark, we could make a pretty safe assumption that a bunch of Jews lived there, and we would feel right at home.

What neighborhoods we choose to live in can say a lot about us. That might be more true here in Boca Raton than almost anywhere else, where so many of us live in named communities or buildings, and those names connote certain amenities, creature

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comforts, and opportunities. Real estate and home pricing being what they are, we often find ourselves living among people of similar means, with comparable interests. Living in neighborhoods gives us an entrée into breaking down barriers between us. There is enough familiarity and similarity with those who live near us that we hopefully can feel safe and secure. In the confines of our neighborhood walls, real or metaphoric, we can challenge ourselves to deepen our understanding of those who are different from us, to learn about the culture and background of people with whom we otherwise might not interact.

When Tami and I moved to Boca a little over 5 years ago, we hit it off with our neighbors across the street. They are Jewish, have two kids around the same age as ours. We learned that we have some common friends across the country. We often seen them at community functions around town. They belong to another synagogue, but we love them anyways. Next door to them live another wonderful family. They are Venezuelan and Catholic. They have two older kids, and a daughter who is 4. And most days after school and on weekends, our three families hang out in the dead end in front of our houses, our kids running and playing together. For the past many years, the six parents have celebrated New Years' together, safely bunkered down in our neighborhood, folding table and chairs deployed in the street, dessert and champagne shared amongst us. We take our kids trick-or-treating together. If it wasn't for this neighborhood, I would never have welcomed Romina and Tomas into our sukkah, and teach them a bit about our tradition. Or ask them to store parts of a Pesach meal in their refrigerator, and then invited them to seder. But for this geographic fluke, I wouldn't be able to hear from them about the tragedy that is befalling their home

country, their imminent becoming of American citizens and the path that they took to get there.

A few years ago, Omid Safi, who is the director of the Duke Islamic Studies Center, an Iranian-American scholar and columnist, reflected on an annual opportunity that we all have to engage neighbors: Halloween. As a Muslim American, he is aware that many people have qualms about celebrating Halloween, because of its blended Christian and pagan origins. Those qualms arise not only in the Muslim community, but in the Jewish and parts of the Christian community as well. But as he opined, “Why praise Halloween in spite of those reservations? Because it’s about neighborhoods. I love the fact that this is the one day of the year in many neighborhoods where people open their doors and receive one another as what we can be all along: neighbors. And how I wish we would live like this every day, like a real community. And I wonder what it says about us when we feel comfortable going up to our neighbors only when we are wearing masks.” As we enter this new year, full of new opportunity, Safi’s guidance could not be more clear: we ought to explore our neighborhoods and engage with our neighbors, so that we might deepen the love in our communities, and ultimately in our world.

Fred Rogers might have been Presbyterian, but any scholar of Jewish thought would tell you that really he was a Buberian. Martin Buber, the great 20th Century Jewish philosopher, wrote his seminal work, *I and Thou*, to guide us to deepening our relationships with the other. Buber taught us that most of our interactions are mundane, pragmatic, and treat most others as characters in the stories of our own lives. The clerk at the grocery store, the Uber driver, our co-workers, even often our

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friends and family, we have pleasant interactions with, but in those moments, we are leaving something on the table. As divinely creating beings, each one of us has and is a part of God, Buber teaches. From time to time, when we engage with someone with the love and fullness of our selves and connect with the fullness of their self, it is a moment of holiness. Fred Rogers taught children to do that. His messages inspired his neighbor to treat others with kindness and understanding, to cultivate curiosity about the world.

When he looked straight into the camera and spoke, he spoke to only one person, his neighbor. His television audience was not the hundreds, thousands, or now millions who see his program. His television audience was the one child who happened to be at the other end, looking into the screen at his neighbor and friend, Mr. Rogers. “It’s you, I like,” he sang during many episodes, “It’s you yourself, It’s you. It’s you I like.”

Fred wanted his neighbors to know of their own self worth, that they were loved and cared for, that in a world in which children can so often feel secondary or separate, they matter. As I have grown up, that feeling of being out of place, of being small, of being unimportant or insignificant, has receded, but it still exists.

We felt especially small and insignificant on that dreadful Tuesday morning, 17 years ago. We all were scared. To feel the havoc wreaked on our communities was disorienting. For those families who saw loved ones perish on that day, the feelings of anguish continue, and we continually offer our condolences and love. One of the many gifts Fred Rogers gave to children, and their parents, were the times when he helped explain tragedy to them. Susan Stamberg, the longtime host of NPR’s Weekend Edition

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Saturday, recalled that she would often invite Fred onto to explain how he would confront those events, even with his youthful audience. He explained assassination, racism, and the *Challenger* explosion. Each time he told his neighbors to seek comfort from their real-life neighbors. All these years later, while watching the documentary, I wondered to myself, “What did Mr. Rogers talk about after 9/11?” I had long since stopped watching the show. As it turns out, the final episode of *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*, Episode 1765, aired on August 31, 2001, just 12 days before the tragedy of 9/11.

He may have been off the air, but his lesson to seek love in our neighbors ought to inspire us. As we enter into this new year 5779 and we hear the sounding of the shofar, may it be for us a call and a cry to deepen our relationships with those around us, to become more understanding of those with whom we differ, and, in the words of Mr. Rogers, to learn to love each other, just for being you.