

Be Kind
Parshat Chayei Sarah
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“It’s A Beautiful Day In the Neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor, would you be mine, could you be mine. It’s a neighborly day in this beauty wood, a neighborly day for a beauty, would you be mine, could you be mine. (Sing accompanied by piano)

Today, one of my favorite movies officially comes out. Earlier this year, I was privileged to be able to preview the movie, *A Beautiful Day In The Neighborhood*, starring Tom Hanks as Mr. Rogers. He begins the movie entering the familiar home signing this song. Exactly one year ago on the Jewish calendar, as we celebrated “Show Up For Shabbat” following the tragic shooting of 11 congregants at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, I spoke for a moment about Mr. Rogers. Not only did that shooting happen in his neighborhood, but I can only imagine how he would feel about such an atrocity. I do not want to give away the movie, because personally I think you all go and see it. In two words though, the movie is about this: Be kind!

And yet, here we are, one year after Pittsburgh, our world has continued to be filled with acts of hate and violence. Just this week, a shooting occurred in Fresno that killed four innocent people who were watching a football game in a neighborhood backyard with friends. I learned a little more about the victims of the shooting in a Los Angeles Times article published this morning. The victims were members of the Hmong (Muhng) community. Fresno is home to one of the largest Hmong communities in the country, second to only Minneapolis. Many Hmong immigrants in California, including the family of one of the victims who was hosting the gathering, are survivors of the Laos Secret War that followed the 1975 collapse of the kingdom of Laos, where they were an ethnic minority. Hmong people fought alongside U.S. troops against communism there during the Vietnam War, making them targets after the Laotian communist

government took over. Most refugees fled to camps in Thailand before being resettled in the U.S.¹ The Hmong people are our neighbors and deserve to be treated with kindness. Instead, they are living with increased fear due to acts of hate.

Our Torah portion this week, *Chayei Sarah*, is thematically linked by the Hebrew word *chesed* or kindness. The word *chesed* is spelled with the letters *chet samekh dalet*. Variations of this word appear many times throughout the portion. Each occurrence involves the interaction between neighbors. I want to illuminate one of these occurrences. After Sarah dies, Abraham charges his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac. Before the servant departs, he prays to God to deal kindly with his master Abraham. Just as he finishes his prayer, he walks Rebecca. She offers him a drink and then a drink to all of his camels. Abraham's servant responds by saying, "Blessed is God for not forsaking his kindness and truth from my master Abraham." What's interesting, here, is that the servant does not thank Rebecca for her kindness but ultimately thanks God.

The Jewish tradition embodies many values, and *chesed* is surely one of them. Each day, we too pray to God during the Amidah for *chesed*. During the *gvurot*, the second blessing in the Amidah, we sang, *m'chal keil Chayim b'chesed*. You sustain our life through kindness. I believe it is God's will for human beings to be kind. Therefore, when I thank God for sustaining us with kindness, I thank God for inspiring humans to fulfill God's will, to be kind.

To be kind seems like a simple thing, right? Our world today, however, seems to challenge that notion. One aspect that has helped me to understand the challenge of being kind are the Kabbalistic or mystic concept of *sphirot* or emanations of God. I in no way consider

¹ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-11-22/fresno-hmong-mass-shooting-gangs>

myself to be an expert in Jewish mysticism but I do find this concept helpful in explaining the challenge of being kind. The *sphirot* are 10 attributes of God that fill a space between God and humanity. The more we incorporate these *sphirot* into our lives, the closer we can get to God. One of them is *chesed*. What I love about the *sphirot* concept is that the image which depicts them shows that no one attribute of God can be acted upon in the world without a push or pull from another attribute. They are all connected. In this case, the attribute of *gvurah*, which means strength, is closely tied with *chesed*. *Gvurot*, the plural of *gvurah*, is the title of the second blessing of the Amidah, which I explained contains the blessing for *chesed*. According to Jewish mysticism, *chesed* does not come in a vacuum. It must be balanced with *gvurah*, strength. Too much of one thing is never a good thing. There are many explanations for why this balance is necessary, but I would like to provide you with my own interpretation.

Consider a teacher who school children consider to be extremely kind. So nice, that she lets you turn in assignments late at any time, she fields phone calls from students at all hours of the day and never reprimands students for talking over her and using their phones in class. This is what I call a push over. Yes, the teacher is kind. Students love this teacher. However, the kindness will have a breaking point. Eventually, the teacher will feel taken advantage of and disrespected. The teacher has no boundaries, so she cannot take care of herself. The students are not learning much because they do not do their homework or pay attention in class. Now, imagine we balance her kindness with strength. The teacher continues to treat the students with kindness, however, she sets some boundaries. Students cannot turn in work late but if a student has trouble due to an extenuating circumstance, she listens to them and provides assistance. She establishes a policy of no phones in class or talking over one another. She continues to help students outside of class, but instead of giving them her phone number and speaking with them at

all hours of the day, she designates certain hours after class to help them and provides assistance through email. Now she has more time to go to the gym, to meditate and recharge. This teacher continues to be kind but has given herself the strength needed to no longer be a push over. In turn, she is happier, and the students learn much more in her class. This kindness can be sustained over time.

Be kind. In our world, this can be hard. For many of us, what we actually need is more strength. With technology, it is more difficult to establish borders around our time and ground ourselves in the things that give us strength. We need to do these things, though. One memorable piece of *A Beautiful Day In The Neighborhood* is a conversation the main character Lloyd has with Mr. Roger's wife, Joanne. She said to him, 'Listen, it's important for you to know that he was not a saint. Because if you think of him as a saint, then his message is unattainable.' Throughout the movie, the viewer gets a glimpse of what Mr. Rogers does to build up his strength. He swam and studied bible each morning, he prayed (as an ordained Presbyterian minister) and he played piano among other things. He was not perfect, but he did what he needed to balance his strength with kindness.

Mr. Rogers famously said: "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." Being kind is not as simply done as it might be stated. However, kindness is essential for living happy and productive lives as individuals and collectively creating a better world to live in. A world without violence and hate. A world where people do not have to be afraid to watch a football game in their backyard or go to synagogue to pray. Being kind is something any human being is capable of doing. May we all find what it is we need to have the *gvurah*, the strength to bring *chesed* or kindness into our world. *Ken Yehi Ratzon*. May it be our will.