

Acrostics were a popular form of expression for our ancestors. Ashrei, also known as Psalm 145, is an acrostic, though missing one important letter. Lecha Dodi, which we sing every Friday night to welcome Shabbat is also an acrostic, an acrostic of the author's name. The form of an acrostic helps to remind the reciter of the correct order, especially helpful when living in an oral rather than text-based society. Though historically Jews were highly literate, not all Jews were literate and even the ones who were - they did not necessarily have access to books. My senior year of high school I had the opportunity to visit an old synagogue in Poland, no longer in use except by groups visiting the area. That was the first place that I saw prayers written, beautifully, on the walls of the synagogue. Our tour guide explained that though people could read, the cost of books for most people was prohibitive. So, instead, they wrote the prayers in large letters on the walls allowing all to have access.

This is how I feel about about our congregation. That we are the words on the wall. A place where we make all people feel welcome, a place where all can find their level of participation. Yet, this is also an ideal that we must always be striving for because not everyone feels welcome all of the time. This often becomes apparent when issues that have no black and white are raised, when our desire to be heard or be right raises its ugly head and does not allow us to see the humanity in one another.

It is times like these that I remember these wise words: "Human beings are so much alike...and yet all so different. How comforting to see the endless variety of people: comforting because one person's differences from another show us that it's all right for us to be different in many ways,

too.”¹ These words come from one of the men who helped shape more than one generation of children, Fred Rogers. His show, Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, gave voice to struggles with differences in a way that children and adults could both understand. His genuine care for those around him, continues to inspire all those he touched.

Differences make us stronger, and in order to embrace differences we need to be a community that both listens and hears one another. The watchword of our faith, Deuteronomy 6:4, Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohainu Adonai Echad, says it all. Listen O Israel, Adonai is Your God Adonai is One. Hear O Israel Adonai is Your God Adonai is One.

Listening and Hearing though often used interchangeably are not the same action. To Listen and to Hear have different definitions and different meanings, even though we often use them interchangeably.

When I think of hearing, I think of noise, of sound. Of being interrupted by a train coming by while eating or a knocking that disrupts a thought. Hearing can be forced upon you, listening is a choice. When I think of listening, I think of active listening. Of looking someone in the eyes and truly listening to what they have to say - with both my ears and my eyes. Active listening requires commitment to not only hear but to understand another person. Human beings communicate so much with our body language, which is often lost in online communication. Are you smirking when you said that? Did your eyes light up with laughter? Or are you serious, so

¹ *You Are Special: Neighborly Wisdom from Mister Rogers*. Fred Rogers. Pg. 114.

serious that you sound distraught? Are you hunched over? Do you make eye contact or not? Hearing and listening are two different things, they impact our lives in two different ways.

You hear a sound, but to listen when someone speaks, you have to put in more effort. I hope that when I speak, I am listened to. I believe it is the hope for many of us, young and old alike. Too often we are distracted by the sounds around us to truly listen but when we make the effort to truly listen we are granted the gift of seeing the layers of identity in the person before us.

Our tradition is rich with stories, and speculations about how to be our best selves. I would like to share one now that I think speaks to the many ways we can actively listen to those in our lives.²

Every year the rabbi of Nemirov was late for Yom Kippur services. And every year the people of the congregation would speculate about the reason. “Maybe the rabbi goes to visit the sick before services,” some said. “Perhaps he prays alone for all of us before coming here to be with us,” others suggested. Still other members of the congregation said, “Maybe he does something we just can’t understand.”

There were two precocious boys in the congregation, and they decided they would find out the truth about why the rabbi was always late. So the night before Yom Kippur, they sneaked into the rabbi’s house and hid under his bed. They watched and waited as the rabbi got into bed and snored throughout the night.

² The following story is from *Three Times CHAI: 54 Rabbis Tell Their Favorite Stories* ed. Laney Katz Becker

While it was still dark, the boys looked on as the rabbi woke up, went to the closet, and put on clothes they had never seen him wear: heavy boots, overalls, a thick wool jacket, and a peasant hat. Once he was fully dressed, the rabbi took a long rope and slung it over his shoulder, grabbed an axe from the closet and walked out of the house.

The two boys looked at each other in amazement and decided to follow the rabbi to see where he went dressed in such an unusual manner. As the rabbi walked through the streets of the village, lit only by the light of the moon, the boys took great pains to make sure the rabbi couldn't see them. They watched as he entered the forest, took the rope, put it down on the ground, and chopped down some trees with the axe.

After a few trees had fallen, the rabbi used the axe to cut the trunk and branches into smaller pieces. Then he took the rope and tied the pieces of wood into a neat bundle, which he hoisted over his shoulder. He left the forest while the boys, still unseen, followed close behind.

The rabbi walked a distance and came to a small, dilapidated cottage. The boys were silent as the rabbi knocked on the door. They heard a faint voice come from inside the cottage.

“Who's there?” asked the voice, which sounded like that of an elderly woman.

“It is me, Vassel the wood chopper,” the rabbi replied. “I have wood for you on this very cold morning.”

“Please go away. I have no money to give you for wood,” the old woman said.

The boys looked on as the rabbi opened the door. “Don’t worry about the money,” he said to the woman.

He went to the stove, placed the wood in it, and lit a fire. “Now you’ll be warm on this cold day,” he said. Without another word, the rabbi left the cottage. The boys looked at each other and followed the rabbi as he quickly returned home, changed into his rabbi’s clothes, and made his way to the synagogue for Yom Kippur services.

Once again the people questioned, “Why is the rabbi always late for Yom Kippur? Where does he go? What does he do before services?”

The two boys listened to the speculation: “Maybe the rabbi goes to the hospital to visit the sick,” one congregant suggested. “Maybe the rabbi takes an especially long time washing and dressing for Yom Kippur,” another guessed. And then one man said, “Maybe the rabbi goes to heaven before coming to pray with us.”

The two boys listened, and together they responded, “No. The rabbi does not go to heaven before services. He goes even higher.”

This is a favorite story of Rabbi David E. Greenberg, of Temple Shaaray Tefila in Bedford Corners, New York. It is one of his favorites because it contains the message the most worthy prayer we can offer is made through our deeds, by treating our fellow human beings with

kindness and love. It is one of his favorites because he recognizes that all people are our neighbors.

How boring would life be if we all believed the same, acted the same, looked the same. While we are all children of God, we are not all the same. Each one of us has been shaped by our experiences, by how society has viewed us, how our families have viewed us, and how we view ourselves. The importance of both word choice and tone cannot be overemphasized when speaking about building a community that is capable of embracing those who both agree and disagree with us.

The role of tone matters in part because children and students do not only listen to what we say, but also to how we say it. Let us take for example an account I read on Twitter a number of weeks ago. The post was by a Black Jewish Woman, and she shared that her 3 year old niece told her that she could not speak Hebrew because she had brown skin. The Tweet concluded with “I can’t wait to show her this video - so grateful for the Black Jewish leaders of today holding the Black Jews of tomorrow #BlackShabbat .”³ The video she retweeted was of Rabbi Sandra Lawson, who works as a chaplain and for Hillel at Elon University in North Carolina, singing Mah Yafeh Hayom: How beautiful this day is. The fact that a three year old little girl believed, and was therefore told by someone, that she would not speak Hebrew because of the color of her skin is heartbreaking. It is unfortunate, no it is terrible, the amount of distrust that has built up within the Jewish community because of the differences of opinion, the different colors of skin,

³ @showandtal Aug 24, 2019 #BlackShabbat

the different places we came from. Judaism is a faith of many colors, and just as in America we know, in our hearts, that diversity is important, so too in Judaism.

But we are not only neighbors to those in this room or to our fellow Jews here and elsewhere.

We are neighbors to all peoples, in all places. We are taught in Torah, Leviticus 19:34 “You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am Adonai your God. “The stranger is one who is not like you but you are to love the stranger as yourself.

We may not always like our neighbors but we are taught that we must care for them as we care for ourselves. Our involvement in ISAAC, is one of the ways we show care for our neighbors here in Kalamazoo. I want to thank those of you who took the time to fill out the survey of what issues are important to you, and I invite each and every one of you to join me at ISAAC’s Issues Convention on Tuesday, October 29th. I also encourage you to become more involved in ISAAC through one of their task forces or through the educational opportunities they offer. Our Social Action Committee will be offering a number of ways to become involved in both ISAAC and our larger community. I hope you will each find a voice in the work we engage in together. This month our focus is Poverty through our donations to Loaves and Fishes, next month we will be running a diaper drive for St. Luke’s diaper pantry. Together we can make sure our neighbors and ourselves have a safe community in which we live.

Another community we are a part of is the Union for Reform Judaism, which itself is a part of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. In the United States we have two million members,

and from December 11th to the 14th, Chicago will host the Union for Reform Judaism's Biennial. You do not need to attend the entire time. The conference has an expected attendance of 5000 Reform Jews from all over the country, and all over the world. It is a unique opportunity to have Biennial occurring so close to us, and I encourage you to consider attending. Early bird registration ends on October 16th, so you still have time! If you have questions about Biennial, please speak to me, XXX or XXX. We are also happy to share that so far we have at least 7 people attending! If finances are a concern, we do have some funds available to help you attend.

Being part of a community also means committing to it financially. We pay taxes so that we have schools and roads. We give to nonprofits so that our vision of the world can come to be. This congregation pays dues to the URJ in order to support the mission of Reform Judaism around the world, as well as right here in Kalamazoo. This community is one of the founding members of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which Rabbi Isaac M Wise hoped would be the union for Jewish congregations in America. Though his vision of one American Judaism did not come to be, I believe he would be proud of the Reform Movement which he helped cultivate throughout his lifetime. We hope you are as invested in us as we are in you, and if you have not spoken with a member of the Endowment Committee about how you can participate in funding this community into perpetuity please reach out to them. The committee is happy to speak to you about the various ways you can give, and we are working hard to have 100% participation in the campaign. No gift is too small, no gift is too large.

Today is our Day of Atonement. May we take the lessons from our liturgy and from our sacred texts with us today and every day. May we remember that our neighbors are not just those who

look or believe or act like we do, but all those we live among both here locally as well as internationally. May we recognize the mistakes we made in the past year, and with a clean slate, work towards a better year. May we continue to work for a better community, for our neighbors and for ourselves. May we recognize our stumbling blocks, and work to overcome them. May we always remember that listening is an act of compassion, love and justice. May we not allow our biases to cloud our good judgment, and may we be blessed for a year of blessing, health, happiness and peace in the Book of Life.

May you each be well over the fast.