

Protecting Dignity

Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker, 10 Tishrei 5779 – Kol Nidre – Mount Zion, St. Paul, Minnesota

The feeling that we belong and that others respect us for who we are is priceless. There is nothing more central to our emotional well-being than that feeling.

When Fred Rogers started *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, he wanted children to feel the security that comes from others' respect and mostly from the love for themselves. This year a documentary and movie in the works about his life is bringing his messages back to America fifty years after he started the show. He said: "Those who would try to make you feel less than who you are, I think that is the greatest evil."¹

Mr. Rogers demonstrated an antidote to this evil in a conversation with a child about quieting self-doubt: "'I wonder if I'm a mistake.' ... You are no mistake. I think you are just fine the way you are. 'The way I look? The way I talk?' Yes! ... I love you just the way you are." On this night of awe, as we reflect on our life, examining our deeds before the True Judge, we return to simple truths because we know them, but find them hard to really believe and act upon at times: Treat yourself with respect, others with dignity. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Yes, many of you might say, "I think I'm pretty good at this, thank you very much, and even though our society seems broken in its moral convictions, I still have my values squared away."

It is not so simple. None of us is immune. Before the Flood, Noah was honored by God for being righteous in his generation. Was his generation's depravity the moral ruler by which to measure?

We may hope a new generation is simply going to know how to be good, how to do the right things, to demonstrate *derech erez*, good behavior, but it won't be by assuming that it will happen. It will be by modeling, talking, countering negative images and messages, and teaching. It will be for parents and caring adults to help kids turn off their devices, to look deep into their eyes and hold their gaze, and to say with compassion and conviction, that they are worthy and can honor others.

Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv spent the last decade of his life in Kelm, Lithuania teaching a few close disciples who would eventually spread the mussar movement throughout Europe and beyond. This was in the late 19th century. He came to be known as the "the Alter," or elder, of Kelm. In the month of Elul preceding the High Holy Days, Rabbi Simcha Zissel posted a public notice on the door of the Kelm Talmud Torah.² All the people in town would pass the Talmud Torah on the way to market as they went about their day to day business, in the hustle and bustle of life, and they would read these words:

¹ This reference as well as others by Fred Rogers come directly from *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, the documentary about Rogers that was released in 2018

² Geoffrey Clausen wrote about Rabbi Zissel in *Jewish Review of Books* and translated this message: <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/519/notice-posted-on-the-door-of-the-kelm-talmud-torah-before-the-high-holidays/>

We have not [yet] prepared ourselves to do what is essential. . . And so we must accept upon ourselves the work of loving people and of unity.

With this, one's path will slowly, slowly improve—and, in any case, one will already have turned a little bit toward repentance...³

Rabbi Simcha Zissel's message is as urgent and necessary in the 21st century as it was in the 19th. This is a simple message and in truth a simple sermon, but it is not easy. We cannot pretend that loving our neighbor as our self has ever been easy.

We might think nostalgically that Mr. Rogers lived in the good ole' days when such public values were clear, but good values are always under assault. Mr. Rogers did what he did because he felt decency was not obvious in his day.

Children were exposed to footage of the Vietnam War and violent protests and morally questionable behaviors of the 60s. Mr. Rogers dropped out of seminary in his senior year to go into television. He worked with the brightest child development psychologists of the day on how to inculcate a new generation in the value of dignity, inner worth.

In the Jewish spiritual, character development tradition of mussar, this attribute of dignity is called *kavod*.

Kavod comes from the Hebrew root for weightiness. Each of us has gravitas, matter that counts. *Kavod* means dignity, respect, and honor.

Above me on this sanctuary wall is the fifth commandment, *Kabeid et avicha v'et amecha, Honor your father and mother*. The rabbis teach that this honor is not when you are a child, but when you are grown up and your parents attain old age. That is when you might not feel your parents' weight in your life. That is when we must honor them.

Dignity comes not from what we have done with our life. Our *kavod* derives fully from our humanity. Every person deserves it.

We all know why. Our inherent value comes from our being created in God's image. Knowing this was a surer bellwether for good behavior than even the Golden Rule according to a teacher in our tradition known as Ben Azzai. It was none other than Rabbi Akiva who disagreed saying the greatest principle in Torah was "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Lev. 19:18). Ben Azzai never attained the ranks of being called a rabbi two millennia ago, but he had the temerity to counter Rabbi Akiva. He knew that our sense of self-worth is most important. It comes from knowing that we are all *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, descended from the same parent, Adam. As in many arguments, Ben Azzai was right and Rabbi Akiva was right.

Ben Azzai's contemporary was Ben Zoma who too was one of the most famous teachers in the Talmud though he died before he became a rabbi. He is known for distilling the theology of creation into short questions and answers. He asks: "Who is honored?" אִיִּזְהוּ מְכֻבָּד. The

answer may sound obvious likely because we have heard it, but it is brilliant: “Who is honored? **הַמְכַבֵּד אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת** One who honors others.”⁴

When he asks that question, “Who is honored?”, Ben Zoma does not mean, “Who is made dignified by other people,” as is the common understanding. What value is there in being dependent on other people giving you dignity? Rather, the Slonimer Rebbe⁵ teaches that Ben Zoma’s statement means that the gaze of one person to another is like glancing in the mirror. If his face is dirty he will see in the mirror a dirty face. So it is the same when a person looks at the other – the amount that he is pure and refined internally, so he will look more generously upon the other and see good attributes. On the other hand, if he is infected with bad attributes and behaviors, so he will see bad attributes in everyone else. Therefore, the truly dignified person is the one who treats all people with dignity, who appreciates all people. This behavior is the true sign that he is dignified himself.

When you appreciate your inherent self-worth, you can then love your neighbor.

Fred Rogers never forgot how vulnerable it is to be a kid. He wanted to heal the wounds of childhood, all the anxieties.

When he testified to Congress in 1969 about funding for public television, he managed to succeed because he spoke straight to the hearts of the senators with simple truths. “We are dealing with the inner drama of childhood,” he said. “I tell the children at the end of each show: There is no one in the world like you and I like you just the way you are. If we can make feelings mentionable and manageable, we would have done a great service for mental health...” Then Mr. Rogers reflected, “I’m constantly worried about what our children are seeing...I’m trying to present a meaningful expression of care.”

He then shared a song that honors feelings, legitimates them, so that they can be given voice and then managed in ways that help our society, our neighborhoods:

What do you do with the mad that you feel?
(That line came straight from a child).
What do you do with the mad that you feel
When you feel so mad you could bite?
When the whole wide world seems oh, so wrong...
And nothing you do seems very right?

What do you do? Do you punch a bag?
Do you pound some clay or some dough?
Do you round up friends for a game of tag?
Or see how fast you go?

It's great to be able to stop
When you've planned a thing that's wrong,

⁴ *Pirke Avot*, Ethics (Literally: “Chapters”) of our Ancestors, 4:1

⁵ Shalom Noach Barzofsky is the Slonimer Rebbe. He is quoted by The Mussar Institute.

<http://media.mussarinstitute.org/MaM/honor0111/KAT211.pdf>

And be able to do something else instead
And think this song:

I can stop when I want to
Can stop when I wish.
I can stop, stop, stop any time.
And what a good feeling to feel like this
And know that the feeling is really mine.
Know that there's something deep inside
That helps us become what we can...

The chairman of the committee, Sen. Pastore responded to Mr. Rogers: "I got goosebumps....I think it's wonderful; it's wonderful. Looks like you just earned your 20 million dollars."

Why did this work? Why did Chairman Pastore, a tough senator from Rhode Island, feel goosebumps listening to Mr. Rogers? It is because at the root of everything is a desire for dignity, for *kavod*. We feel that dignity stripped so many times a day. We allow others to control our sense of self-worth and when it is removed, we feel shame.

There is the story of Rebbe Akiva Eiger, who had guests at his Shabbat table, one of whom accidentally knocked over a glass of wine. The other guests were horrified as wine spread across the tablecloth. The Rebbe, seeing the embarrassment on the man's face, swiftly knocked over his own glass, declaring, "The table must be crooked!"

As philosopher Moshe Halbertal says, shame gets to two core issues, the mental suffering we feel in the moment and the real or perceived diminishment of social standing.

We Jews get this. It is in our texts and our lived experiences.

French jurist and Holocaust survivor, Rene Cassin, has been called the father of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was passed in the same year Israel became a state. Cassin was honored for his role with a Nobel Peace prize⁶: The preamble to the Declaration opens with dignity:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world...

Human rights start with "recognition of the inherent dignity...of all members of the human family." *Kavod* can be inherent. It can be offered freely like love. It can also be stripped away.

Aretha Franklin's song "Respect" became an empowering battle cry for the civil rights movement and the women's movement when *kavod* was not freely given. It was originally written and sung by Otis Redding, but it was Aretha's life and the way she imbued every letter of r-e-s-p-e-c-t with meaning that broke open America's heart. From her mouth, calling for

⁶ It is known that the many people were involved in writing the document and ascribing it to one person is more problematic.

“respect” was not a hope ... it was a demand! In Judaism we call it a *mitzvah*, a sacred obligation.

My friend Rabbi Zoe Klein recently wrote about a new book by Donna Hicks called “*Leading With Dignity: How to Create a Culture That Brings Out the Best in People.*” Hicks has worked extensively on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as conflicts in Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, Colombia and Cuba. In her work on conflict resolution, Hicks discovered, according to Rabbi Klein, that what is of utmost importance to us human beings is how we feel about who we are. Her research shows that we are just as programmed to sense a threat to our dignity as we are to a physical threat.

According to Hicks, we don’t have to respect each other’s opinions to achieve conflict resolution; what we have to do is protect each other’s dignity.

On this Yom Kippur, as we confess our sins, we can also confess our promises.

We will protect dignity when we don’t play the game of put downs and name calling.

We will protect *kavod* when we look into our neighbor’s eyes and smile.

We will protect dignity when we truly feel the sacred weight of each person’s being and honor their feelings.

We will protect *kavod* when we say, like Yossi Klein Halevi said to his Palestinian neighbor, I want to hear your story.

We will protect dignity when we don’t hold anyone to the first thing that they say, when we give them the benefit of doubt, and when we stay curious.

We will protect *kavod* when our actions and speech do not demean or hurt anyone based on their looks, their sexuality, their gender, or their beliefs.

This is not complicated, but it is not as easy as one may hope. It takes consistent effort and the risk of uncomfortable conversations calling out violations of dignity lovingly but clearly. It takes remembering to practice small improvements in our reactions. We will not succeed all the time; no one does, but we can become more prone to success with effort. Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, the Alter of Kelm, encourages us in just this direction. Living a life of *kavod* is a lifelong practice. He says, “It is the work of a lifetime and that is why you have been given exactly a lifetime in which to do it.”

Fred Rogers was interviewed shortly after 9/11 when newscasters were looking for living symbols of being a good neighbor. He said: “We are called to be *tikkun olam*, repairers of creation. Thank you for whatever you do, wherever you are, to bring joy and light and hope and faith and pardon and love to your neighbor and to yourself.”

May we be such a neighbor, recognizing our own self-worth so that we can help all feel their inherent dignity.