

At Home with our Neighbors, At Home with Ourselves
Yom Kippur Afternoon
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As a child growing up in a suburb of a suburb, apartment living was the kind of thing we only read about in books. In apartments, sophisticated city kids did things like ride in the elevators and walk to the store. I never imagined that I might someday live in an urban center, the kind of place where apartment living makes a lot of sense for someone at my age and stage. Like the sophisticates of my childhood novels, I now ride the elevator daily down to our shared parking garage, and walk to the many stores and restaurants in my busy neighborhood. I'm really living the dream!

But one dream of apartment living hasn't come true. My husband and I haven't found a kindly neighbor who volunteers to take in the mail for us while we're out of town, and if we need a cup of sugar we usually will run out to the store rather than knocking on the door across the hall. My neighbors and I function in our own spheres. We exchange pleasantries at the mailbox, but there is no nostalgic apartment camaraderie like you might expect after watching an episode of 'The Big Bang Theory,' 'Friends' or even 'Mary Tyler Moore.' I am sure that if I got to know them, I would like my neighbors just fine... but I am a world away from the charge we find in today's *parasha*, to 'love your neighbor as yourself.'

V'ahavta l'reiecha k'mocha,
Love your neighbor as yourself –

A *mitzvah* so important that we find it in today's Torah portion, in the final hours of the holiest day of the year. And yet, it is one of the hardest *mitzvot* to do in today's individualistic world, a world in which we *must* look out for ourselves. Our keen awareness of stranger danger and a general sense of insularity keep us at arms length with the very neighbors we are told to love.

Of course, when we speak about our neighbors, it is not just the ones living in close proximity to our homes, across the hall, in the house next door, or even across the street. We can take the Torah's commandment to mean our slightly more distant neighbors, as well. Our neighbors on the other side of the city. Our neighbors on the other side of the country. Even our neighbors on the other side of the world.

In some ways, the further our neighbor is, the easier it to show our love. We can participate in the Walk to end Genocide in Darfur, we can send money and supplies victims of natural disasters in far away countries.

But it often seems that the closer the neighbor, the more distant we become – We avoid eye contact with the shopkeeper down the street who paces outside her empty store, hoping to entice people inside. We keep our windows tightly rolled when someone outside our car door asks for money or food.

And what about when we get even closer?
Inside our homes – our families and friends – the ones we really *do* love can become the victims of our harshest moods.

And even closer than that:

The root of our commandment in the first place: We are told to love our neighbors as we love ourselves – and that second part – loving ourselves – is likely the reason why we struggle with the first part. Before we can show love to others, we must make peace with ourselves.

The sermons that we've heard over these last 10 days are the proof that remembering to love ourselves is the hardest part. We've heard about the challenges we face in finding our purpose, in finding inner compassion, in finding happiness. We've heard about the struggles of picking ourselves up out of the holes we find ourselves in, and the ways we need to watch our own behavior to create a peaceful home environment.

As we search for home over this High Holy Day season, we are focused almost entirely on how to better *be at home with ourselves*. And it's only when we can be satisfied in our own selves that we can best extend love out to our families, and our friends, and our neighbors.

When we really *do* Yom Kippur, we make ourselves better.
We are able to let go of our guilt and shame.
We are able to begin again as our most perfect selves, and hold ourselves up as the people we truly want to be.

And that moment:
when we love ourselves enough to be at home in our own skin, that is when we are free to give outward love: for our families, our friends, and our neighbors both near and far.

As I left the house to walk my dog yesterday afternoon, I ran into my across the hall neighbors. Their little boy always eyes our puppy with curiosity, and this time I put my guard down.

"Would you like to pet the dog?" I asked the boy.
His eyes widened, and the two became fast friends.
His parents noticed my white shoes, and asked if I was on my way to synagogue.

We talked for a few more minutes about where we are going to services, and our favorite foods for break-fast – and parted with a sincere *G'mar Chatimah Tova*.

Before that moment I didn't know their names, much less that we shared a common heritage.

I wouldn't call it love yet, but if I needed to, I would definitely walk across the hall and ask to borrow a cup of sugar.

In this coming year, may we face our neighbors.
But more importantly, may we honestly face ourselves.