

Passover VIII/Yizkor 5786  
The Light Our Loved Ones Add  
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Chag Sameach.

How does the synagogue look different today from all other days?

When you pass by the memorial boards in the lobby, all the lights by all the plaques are turned on. Why is that?

The electric bulbs by all those names stand in for lit memorial candles. We are familiar with these 24 hour Yahrzeit candles, as we light one at home for our deceased family on the anniversary of their death - the Yahrzeit. The Jewish tradition encourages us to light these same candles at home the night before a day on which we say Yizkor. The real question is, why do Jews mark the memory of a loved one with a candle?

The Chabad website says it well: when a soul departs this world, it leaves behind a dark void. You light a candle to bring a little of that light back. Each flame reminds you of the light your loved one brought to this world, and to your life.

Maybe it was your mother or father. Or your brother or sister. Or your husband or wife. Or G-d forbid your child. Or other relatives. They are no longer here, but their light still reaches you. Still guides you even in the dark.

The former JTS Chancellor Ismar Schorsch wrote: [Lighting a memorial candle] reminds me of my parents' ongoing presence in my life. Light betokens life."

If your child or a grandchild were to ask you, "Tell me about your deceased loved one," how do you answer? How could you ever fully explain who they were to you? And how do you visually symbolize their legacy and memory?

The Torah returns to the same image again and again when it feels a need to express the inexpressible: images of light:

"Let there be light" was the first act of Creation when G-d created the world.

The burning bush was where G-d introduced Himself to Moses.

A pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day, was how G-d led the Israelites through the desert.

A Menorah was a central feature in the portable Mishkan sanctuary, and later in the permanent Jerusalem Temple.

Every permanent synagogue is crowned by a Ner Tamid, the eternal light. Which symbolizes both G-d's ongoing presence, and the eternity of the Jewish people.

Lighting a memorial candle is not new at all. The rabbis of the Talmud of 2,000 years ago spoke about a fire of the dead. Perhaps they were inspired by a verse from Proverbs: "*Ner Hashem Nishmat Adam*: The soul of a person is the lamp of Hashem" (Pr. 20:27).

In a few minutes, we will continue with the personal Yizkor prayers. As you do so today, consider: What light did your loved one add to your world? What values did they spark in you? In what ways are you different because of them?

When I say these memorial prayers myself, I think first of my grandfather of blessed memory, Henry Freedman. In about two weeks, my oldest son will have his Bar Mitzvah here. It's so special that some people who were in the room for *my* Bar Mitzvah years ago - my family - will be here in *this* room. At the same time, my grandfather was there for my Bar Mitzvah, but of course he can't join us here for Avi's. If you are a parent, you understand this perfectly. Even in moments of celebration - certainly a Bar/Bat Mitzvah or wedding, and even a Passover Seder - we notice the empty seats. And we know exactly who should be sitting there.

I remember my late grandfather with so much love. As he lived out of town, I only saw him once or twice a year. There was one Passover we all went to Orlando to do Disney World together. He was quite old at the time and walked very slowly. While at Disney World, my sister and I walked extra fast to get to all the rides we wanted to do. He pushed himself so hard to keep up with us because he wanted to be part of that special family memory. I didn't understand that then. But he absolutely was. He's in all the photos, dressed in a sport coat and tie, for some reason. That particular picture is how I remember his love. That is the light he added to our family.

As those memorial lights glow around us, and as we prepare to say Yizkor, take a moment: What light did your loved one add to your life?

Chag Sameach.