

I remember the reflection flickering in the window above the sink. Each year when I was growing up, right around this time of year, my dad would light the yizkor candle in memory of his father, Henry Goldsmith, my grandfather who I never knew. It would sit on the counter until bedtime and then it was placed in the sink where it could not fall over and burn anything. When it got dark that candle's reflection came in off the window, illuminating even the darkest night.

Candles mark our days, the rhythm of our years. Shabbat and Chanukah, holy days and festivals. And the Yizkor candle. Traditionally five times a year: Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Passover, Shavuot and on Yartzheit, the anniversary of our loved ones death. The flame brings us comfort. The light of memory, light in darkness, the eternality of the soul. The candle glows but, as the poet says, eventually it burns down and gutters, there is an end to the flame, it is no more. We surely know the path of a candle. The flame melts the wax as it burns and gives light. From top to bottom. Until it is gone. Our grief is less certain.

In 1969 Elizabeth Kübler-Ross outlined the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Our linear, problem-solving society embraced it as a road map, a way to categorize grief, to manage it, to predict it. Later in life Kübler-Ross expressed regret at what her work had become. You see, she never intended for the stages to be linear. When we experience loss, especially the most profound loss of death, we experience all of these things. But not in any order, not for a fixed duration. We experience these things and then they go away and then they come back again. Acceptance and anger can co-exist. Years later we can feel profound denial well-up from a store of grief we did not know we had.

Grief is not a candle, slowly burning until it ends. Our loved ones still live in our hearts. When we see them no more, our hearts break, again and again. Unexpectedly. One moment our new normal sustains us and we laugh. The next moment, we sit unsuspecting, as grief fills in amid the joys of our life. The love we have for those we've lost, our connection to them, is as eternal as light itself.

This afternoon we'll refract that light of memory through seven candles. They too suggest an order, a progression, but any who know loss and grief know that our feelings move back and forth, to and fro, with no straight line or destination. Our seven candles will represent: The loss of a loved one, inner strength and survival, the holiness of memory, our most precious relationships, acceptance, gratitude, and finding peace. In this service we feel these all at once, or none at all, or a few at a time. However we experience our memory, this service assures us of its holiness. For each candle, we will have a reading, a piece of music, and a blessing. You may stay with us or you may wander the pages of this service as you please. This time is your time. Time for you and the people you've loved and lost.

It seems that a candle burns down and disappears. But we know that nothing can ever be truly destroyed, nothing ever stops existing, only transforms. As the wax and wick turn into energy of heat and light, so too our loved ones. They have not disappeared. They have transformed into memory and encouragement, into inspiration and pause, into tears and love. Like a yizkor candle reflecting off a kitchen window, they are the lights that show us the way in the darkest nights.