

**Shavuot 5779 - Yizkor Sermon**  
Rabbi Susan Miller Rheins

The assignment for my first chemistry lab in high school was to observe the flame of a lit candle for 20 minutes. The class was divided into pairs. Each group was given a ream of hole-punched paper that had two columns and dozens of rows. One column was for recording the time and the other column was for documenting the observation. Each pair of students was given the same supplies: a 6-inch white taper, a candlestick, a matchbook, and a stopwatch. The teacher told us to take turns: for ten minutes one of us would be the observer and the other student would be the recorder, and then we'd switch roles. Twenty minutes to stare at the flame of a lit candle? Fire. Melting wax. Perhaps some smoke. What more could there be? This was going to be a long 20 minutes.

My partner and I decided that I would observe first. As the seconds ticked by and I stared at the flame, I realized that there was a lot going on. Of course, I'd watched candles burn before, but I'd never paid such focused attention to the flame. I was mesmerized by its playfulness, its lively dancing. Sometimes the flame burst upward, stretching to a great height. Sometimes the flame crouched low, hovering above the pool of clear, melted wax gathering at the base of the wick. The flame's spectrum of colors was incredible: shades of blue and brown and red and orange and yellow and white. The top of the flickering flame was delicate, feathered, and wispy. The brightness of the flame fluctuated, likewise the intensity of the heat it emitted. I was riveted by the activity in this delicate flame and, every 15 seconds, shared these observations with my lab partners who documented them accordingly.

When we switched roles, my lab partner observed very different things than I. So much had changed in the ten minutes that elapsed that hers was a different experiment

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than mine. My observation began with a newly lit flame that first melted the wax on the wick before gently carving a crater on the top of the candle. Her observation began with the candle of a different height and a different surface area. More liquid wax was pooled in the crater, which now was surrounded by a range of gently, sloping edges. Wax drippings of various lengths and shapes hung like stalactites around the nub of the candle. Since we hadn't switched seats, my partner's perspective, from a physical point of view, was completely different than mine.

So it is today as we gaze at this Yizkor candle. Each of our perspectives is unique, influenced by where we're sitting, by where our eyes wander, by why we're here on this Shavuot this morning. Some of us are here to rejoice on this *mikra kodesh*, this sacred Festival. Some of us are here for the free blintz brunch. Some of us are here for Yizkor, to remember our loved ones and friends who died recently or in years past. Some of us are here for all three reasons. Regardless of why we are here, each of our perspectives is distinct and unique.

The Jewish tradition of kindling a memorial fire dates at least to the Mishnaic period, approximately 2,000 years ago. Symbols coarsely etched into the walls of ancient Jewish burial caves and elaborately carved on stone coffins attest to this age-old custom. The most common symbols are the seven-branched menorah and the *ner tamid*, the perpetual light described in Exodus. Textual references from the Mishnaic era are further evidence of this practice.

Today, when we kindle the memorial fire, we recite four words from the Book of Proverbs (20:27): ...נֵר יְהוָה נְשִׁמַת אָדָם -- "*The human spirit is the lamp of the Eternal.*" What does this mean, "*The human spirit is the lamp of the Eternal?*" A compelling

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interpretation is that the word נֵר, which we translate as lamp or candle, is an acronym for two Hebrew words. The *nun* stands for *neshamah*, soul. The *reish* stands for *ruach*, spirit. These dual qualities represent the Divine life-force within us, our inner selves, the mysterious, inexplicable essence that is unique to each of us. We recite these words to remind ourselves that the human soul and the human spirit endure forever, like the eternal presence of God.

Four times a year, we observe *yizkor* to honor the *neshamah* and the *ruach* of our loved ones. Four times a year, we kindle the *yizkor* flame and recite these words of comfort. We also do so on the *yahrzeit*, the annual anniversary, of a loved one's death. In the glow of the dancing flame, we remember. We remember how our loved ones' lives were dynamic and animated. We remember how our loved ones' lives were a spectrum of experiences and interactions. We remember how our loved ones' lives melded opportunities and challenges. We remember how our loved ones' lives were a flux of emotions and feelings. We remember how our loved ones' lives interwove with ours in a unique and personal way. We kindle the Yizkor flame because we understand how profound it is to remember.

Like the candle in my high school lab that was transformed by an unnoticeable chemical reaction, so are we transformed by the death of a loved one or friend:

A spouse of many years must reinvent his or her life.

A child becomes the matriarch or the patriarch of the family.

A sibling has to seek a new ally with whom to scheme or rival with whom to squabble.

A friend must find a new acquaintance to be an unconditional support.

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Such transformations are difficult. We are challenged in ways that sometimes feel insurmountable. Jewish tradition teaches us *u'vacharta bachayim*, to choose life, to continue to live, even in the shadow of grief.

A candle. A flame. A memory.

May God bless us with the strength to persevere.

May God bless us with insight to reflect tenderly on the past.

May God bless us with memories undiminished by time, everlasting tributes to those whose lives brightened ours.