

REMEMBER TO REMEMBER
Yizkor 2023
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In our home, Yom Kippur begins with the lighting of Yahrzeit candles. As each candle is lit, the name of the deceased is mentioned until our list is complete. We then move on to the blessings over the Yom Tov candles, Kiddush, and HaMotzi. With the blessings completed, it's time for a festive family meal together. Later, some continue on to Kol Nidrei. Others go home. All the while, the Yahrzeit candles keep burning silent testimony to the people no longer with us, but whose presence permeates the entire holiday.

After everyone is finished eating and the dishes are put away, the house becomes quiet and the candles keep burning. The flames dance silently in their small glass containers and cast shadows around the room. Minute by minute, their transcendent power grows, as a hush falls over the house. The tiny, flickering lights work to unlock the vast chambers of memory which run through our souls. Those little lights shine like antique lanterns in the passageways of our memories, as we fall into the special sleep of a sacred night.

The morning light erases the shadows and makes the flames seem smaller, though no less powerful. It's as if their work as keys which unlock the doors of memory is done. Slowly, but steadily, our minds and hearts fill with irrepressible thoughts throughout the Day of Atonement, until we reach the moment of collective remembrance, at the beginning of Yizkor services, and here we are, together, prepared, a little bit anxious, and a flood of memories swelling within us. Yizkor means, "May God remember". In Judaism, remembering is a mitzvah.

By now we have prayed together and sung together as a scared community, for hours. We have bonded together as a congregation, as only we can on the Day of Atonement. But deep down, it is not the communal voice or the majesty of this setting which stirs us. Rather, it's those little embers of memory which burst into flames of grief, loss, and incompleteness.

Now, here, in the light of day, the enduring memories of our grandparents, parents, siblings, spouses, children, cousins, and friends are in full force. They stand in front of us again. They sit by our side. Their voices are in our ears. Their body language is recalled. Their unique scent swirls around us. Through the mist of mind and memory, they are with us again, and sentient. The pain of loss is temporarily dulled. The selective filters of consciousness are gone, as we close our eyes and remember them.

We need to remember.

We want to remember, and remember we do, even for a moment, even for a second, until the last memorial prayer recedes to the horizon of our waking consciousness.

We know we can't see or hear or touch them.
But, somehow, we are reassured that their presence is still with us, within us, and dwells just beyond the reach of the living world.

We remember the shared moments, the love, the wisdom, the big hurts, and the little pains.

We return to the world of light and community. The ancient prayers again fill the present with sacred words and melodies. The final blast of the shofar is heard and we return to our homes.

There on the mantle are our Yahrzeit candles, almost spent, almost burned out, almost empty vessels, still reassuring us that all around us is a dimension of transcendent spirit, which grounds us eternally in love.

Until the last orange ember goes out, and wisps of smoke works work their way back to heaven and into the cosmic reservoir of sacred memory, where love never dies, the completeness of life we long for remains.

On this sacred day, at this sacred time, let us remember to remember to light the sacred light of eternal memories of all those who are gone but remain with us.

At this moment, may God bring comfort to the hearts of all who mourn, and may the Eternal One bless us with peace.

Amen.