

SERMON BEFORE YIZKOR 5781

There are threads that connect the generations one to another. Sometimes those threads seem to go in a straight line, sometimes they pull and wind around in different directions; at times the threads get tangled or knotted, or become so frayed that it looks as if they might wear entirely away. But then, somehow, we recover a single strand. A single thread, that guides us back, that renews the connection.

The connection between past and present. Between life and death. The connection to our beloveds gone from this earth, yet still so present in our lives. Threads that link the losses of the past to our own time, and to hopes for better future.

For Jewish women living in Eastern Europe, these threads were more than metaphorical. As the new year approached, skilled women went to the cemetery and walked around its perimeter, measuring the boundaries with special thread that they carefully unwound as they walked. Usually three of these women walked together; one measuring, a second unwinding the thread, a third rolling it back into a skein. The threads would be used for as wicking for Yizkor/Memorial candles on Yom Kippur. As the women proceeded, they were followed by the woman who had ordered those wicks to make her candles, and she would recite *techines*, special prayers in Yiddish. (Based on research cited by Chava Weissler in *Voices of the Matriarchs*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1998; See "Candles for the Dead," pp. 134f.)

After the *feldmesn*, or measuring was completed, the woman would bring the threads home and later, generally “in the synagogue, on a Monday or Thursday between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, they would be made into candles for Yom Kippur. This ritual of making the candles was called *kneytlach legn*, laying the wicks. A poor woman who knew how to make the candles would receive the wicks. She would take up each wick in turn, while the woman who had asked her to make the candle would say begin praying. They would make a candle for the living, filled with blessings for health and well-being. After that, they would proceed to “the making of the candle ‘for the dead,’ also called ‘the soul candle.’ The entire process of making the candles was infused with prayer.

“Riboyne shel oylem,” the woman would say...

You commanded us to prepare candles for this holy day; therefore I beseech You, dear Father, that You accept my performing of the *mitzve* of *licht machn* - preparing the wicks - and grant us life and peace. May You speedily accept the prayers which are said by the light of these candles, for we pray with complete *kavone* and sincerity. Please forgive the sins that we committed throughout the year...Do not remember them, but rather, as *Yom HaDin* approaches, seek out the *mitzves* which we have performed. Decree for us a fresh, new, and healthy year...

“Riboyne shel oylem, I beseech You, merciful God, to accept the candles that we prepare for the sake of the holy and pure souls. For each wick that we prepare, may You add life. May the holy souls awaken from their graves and pray for us, that we should be healthy, so that we may pray

for those who died in our generations and for those who died since the time of *Odem* and *Khavé*, Adam and Eve.

Today we prepare candles for the sake of all these souls and for the sake of the souls who lie in the fields and forests and for all the martyrs and for those who had no children and for all the little children who died. We pray that their dry bones come alive speedily and soon. May we merit to witness *techiyas hameyseem* - the resurrection of the dead – this year. *Omeyn, selo.*" (This version is from *The Merit of Our Mothers: A Bilingual Anthology of Jewish Women's Prayers*, compiled and introduced by Tracy Guren Klirs. Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1992)

This is a section of a much longer *techine*, a Jewish women's prayer, written by a woman named Sore bas Toyvim. The daughter of a rabbi, it is believed she was born in the 17th century in the Ukraine. (Klirs, p. 4) Sore's *techine for licht machn*, preparing the wicks, imbued the actions of the candlemakers with deep spiritual significance and religious meaning.

The wicks had been cut from thread that literally "took the measure" of the dead. And remember that the thread had been wound around the *circumference* of the cemetery, marking the boundary between the world of the living and the dead.

And yet, as the women made their way around the cemetery, unspooling the thread with each circling of the graves, they knew - as we surely know - that the border between the living and the dead is but a thin line and is, in fact, permeable. Our dead are not really gone from us. And one day, we will lie where they lie now.

In 1946, Bella Chagall, wife of artist Marc Chagall, wrote a memoir of her childhood, entitled *Burning Lights*. She describes how moved she was as a girl helping her mother prepare the candles for Yom Kippur. This private time for improvised prayer provided an opportunity for memories and feelings to flow. “Mother is calling me.” She writes.

“From a distance I see her eyes gleaming, her hands moving quietly as though preparing to embrace someone. She tells me to hold the skeins of thread before the large wax candles that will burn in the shul at the cantor’s reading stand.” (Quoted in “Beyond Introspection,” by Aviva Richman, HADAR)

Chagall describes the process of making two candles. First, there was the candle of the living, when her mother offered prayers on behalf of living relatives: She pulls out the first thread.

“For my beloved husband, for Shmuel Noah—may he be healthy and live to his hundred-and-twentieth year.”...

Names are slowly intoned, threads are drawn, now yellow with wax and tears. I can hardly hold all the ends that remain free of wax... One heavy candle is now ready.”

One by one, Bella’s mother names her living relatives and rubs wax on to the threads, which are joined together to form one heavy candle:

“With every name a tear drops on the thread and at once is imbedded in the wax like a little pearl.” (Chagall, p. 85, Cited in “Soul Candles,” by Jane Enkin <http://telshemesh.org/tishrei/soulcandles.html>)

She then makes a candle for her deceased relatives, wishing them rest in paradise and asking them to pray for the living family. Bella observes:

“Apparently, she would like to linger with her mother as long as possible; she moves the wax slowly and does not let the thread go from her hands.” (Chagall, p.86)

Young Bella holds the threads for her mother, listening and imagining, as her mother’s tears and petitions become more and more moving:

“For each one, mother sheds a tear; it is like sending a greeting to every one of them. I no longer hear their names; I might be walking around an unfamiliar graveyard. I see only threads... I am glad when at last the *shames*, who is waiting for the candles, carries them to the shul.”
(Chagall, p.86-87)

The late Dov Noy, renowned folklorist and ethnographer, recalled the “specific details of candle making in his mother’s town – how the local candle factory donated the wax for the women to make handmade candles with the measured wicks... The customs were regional, with many variations. In some towns the candles were dipped, in others the wax was rubbed or pressed on to the wicks. Some women met in the synagogue to make candles together, others worked at home. Some lit the candles for the living souls at their family table, others brought all the candles to light the Yom Kippur service. (Enkin, p. 15)

I am imagining those Yom Kippur candles now. Prepared with such care and devotion. The threads measured and cut, dipped or pressed and woven together. Made with love and longing, imbued with suffering and tears, holiness and hope.

And then, on Kol Nidrei night, those special candles illuminating the shuls, as on no other night of the year. Thick, braided candles, thick with souls and memories. Burning throughout the long night and day until *Ne'ilah*, until the closing of the gates.

Those Yom Kippur candles. From measured thread to blazing light. From death to life and back again.

Like many of you, I lit Yahrzeit candles yesterday, on the eve of Yom Kippur. They were plain white votive candles in glass jars that I had purchased in the supermarket. Probably most of you did the same.

But what if we had prepared those candles the way our foremothers had done? What might it feel like to look at the wicks of the Yom Kippur Yahrzeit candles and see them not as something utilitarian, but as a collection of sacred threads burning bright, a holy connection to our people's past, a powerful tie to our beloveds?

On Yom Kippur, we straddle the divide between life and death. Dressed in white, refraining from eating and drinking and sex, we rehearse our own deaths. We own up to our mistakes, increasingly feel our frailties as the day wanes, and admit that our lives are fleeting.

Yom Kippur demands that we look mortality in the face and having done so, decide what to do with the precious time we are allotted. It's not an easy task.

But if we are determined to do really do *teshuva*, to renew our lives and our world, we know one thing. We cannot do it alone. We will need help.

Where might we find the support, strength and resolve that we need this day?

From God, from deep within ourselves, from our community, from those gathered with us here on this day (yes, even remotely, on this Zoom and across the Jewish world on this Yom Kippur); we find strength and hope from our history, from the stories of our ancestors, knowing what they went through, from our family and friends, in this world and beyond.

Rabbi Debra Cantor

Today, on Yom Kippur, the borders between life and death, indeed, between the living and the dead, are more porous. Today, on Yom Kippur, the dead and the living are connected in a deeper way. Today, we pray for one another across all boundaries. For there are threads that link the generations one to the other. And today we draw them closer.

We begin our service of remembrance this afternoon on p. 554