***Kol Nidei:* Acknowledging the Darkness and Committing to Light**

Let me start off with a question: How many of you lit candles before coming to synagogue tonight?

And how many of you did **not** light candles?

Ok—here’s another question: How many of you think you are **supposed** to light candles before the start of Yom Kippur?

So, what’s the answer: Are we commanded to light candles before Yom Kippur comes in, just like we are commanded to light candles before Shabbat comes in? Well, like so many questions in Jewish life, the answer is: **It depends.** Meaning it depends on which rabbi you ask!

In fact, the Mishnah in the tractate *Pesahim* contains a teaching that highlights this very debate: “In a place where the practice is **to light** the candle on the night of Yom Kippur—**they should light**; in contrast, in a place where the practice is **not to light**—**they should** **not light**."

What that means for those of you who **did not** light candles before coming here is that you were right **not** to light them.

And for those of you who **did** light candles before coming here, you were also right **to** light them!

Why do I bring to you this question to you on *Kol Nidrei* eve—at the start of the holiest day on the calendar?

Because I want to suggest to you that this question is far more than a question of **ritual.** The debate is **less** about whether to light candles and **more** about whether Yom Kippur is primarily a day that should be devoted to *light, hope and optimism*, or whether it is primarily a day devoted to *confronting darkness, finitude and limitations*.

Tonight, I want to explore this ancient debate not merely as an academic exercise, but as a window into understanding how we, in our own lives, and in our own time, can navigate this essential tension of Yom Kippur in a fruitful way. Because lighting candles on Yom Kippur is really a question about the very **soul** of this day.

The Sages who insisted that we **do not light candles**—that we **do not** bring in light at the start of the day—saw Yom Kippur as a night of **confrontation**—with our *mortality*, with our *failures*, with our *brokenness*. Like someone venturing into a remote clearing to experience the majesty of the night sky, only to have their companion turn on a flashlight and destroy the sublime encounter with infinity, those communities that did **not** light candles on Yom Kippur feared that light would *cushion them* from the necessary encounter with the void. For them, Yom Kippur was meant to be devoted to confronting limitations, a day where wearing white *kittels* would evoke burial shrouds and the very finitude of life. In this view, Yom Kippur was a day devoted to confronting our **mortality,** and by extension, our human limits**.**

The Rabbis who insisted that we **must** light the candles before Yom Kippur had an equally compelling vision. For them, Yom Kippur was not primarily about wallowing in **darkness**, but about *celebrating the possibility of transformation*, the promise of *atonement*, the joy of *renewal*. They saw Yom Kippur as one of the two happiest days of the year, as the Mishnah in *Ta'anit* teaches us, it was a day when everyone would wear white **not** to evoke shrouds—but rather, as **garments of celebration**—radiating the *light of hope of divine forgiveness*.

So which custom is correct? Should we light the candles or should we not?

I will give you the prototypical Jewish answer: Yes and yes! Because Yom Kippur contains multitudes: a day devoted to holding contradictions, a day to embrace complexity, a day to resist the human tendency to flatten spiritual experience into simple categories. Ultimately, the beauty and drama of Yom Kippur is its ability to allow us to confront the darkness while helping us to commit ourselves to bringing more light into the world.

These last few years have provided us with powerful examples of both experiences—moments in which light broke through the darkness, and times when darkness seemed overwhelming. Let me share with you contemporary examples that demonstrate the multiple meanings of this Yom Kippur day, and more importantly, how we as Jews are called upon to be the ones who kindle light even in the darkest of times.

The first example of light piercing the darkness came from one of the most horrific days in recent Jewish history. On October 7th, 2023, as Hamas terrorists invaded Israeli communities, murdering, raping, and kidnapping innocent civilians, something remarkable happened in the midst of an unthinkable horror. In *Kibbutz Be'eri*, as terrorists rampaged through homes, Ofir Libstein, the kibbutz's security coordinator and a grandfather of seven, made a choice that embodied the deepest meaning of bringing light into darkness.

Instead of fleeing to safety, Libstein ran toward the danger. For hours, he moved from house to house, warning residents, helping families escape, organizing defense efforts, and coordinating with Israeli forces. He stayed on his radio, calmly directing rescue operations even as bullets flew around him. When he was finally killed defending his community, his last radio transmission was heard across the kibbutz: “I'm staying with my people.”

Libstein's choice—to risk everything to save others, to remain at his post when he could have fled, to transform terror into an act of supreme love for his community—represents the light that Jews are called to kindle in the world. Not the light of naivete or denial, but the light of moral courage that refuses to let darkness have the final word. His sacrifice saved dozens of lives, but more than that, it demonstrated that even in humanity's darkest moments, the choice to bring light remains available to us.

This is what our tradition means when it teaches that we are called to be an *or la’goyim—*“light unto the nations.” It doesn't mean that we are supposed to claim to the world that we are superior. It means that in moments in which civilization itself seems to be crumbling, when hatred and violence threaten to consume everything, Jews are called to be the ones who choose light—who choose to protect the vulnerable, who choose to preserve human dignity, who choose to affirm life even at great personal cost.

But this past year has also provided us with painful moments when darkness seemed to swallow everything, when the temptation to despair felt overwhelming, when the choice to sit with darkness reflected not theological preference, but necessary moral reckoning.

Here in the United States, we have witnessed an alarming rise in antisemitic incidents, reaching levels not seen since for generations. Jewish students have been harassed on college campuses, synagogues have been vandalized, and Jewish families have been made to feel unsafe in their own neighborhoods.

In 2024, the ADL tabulated 9,354 antisemitic incidents across the United States. This represents a 344% increase over the past five years and an 893% increase over the past 10 years. Incidents on college and university campuses rose more steeply than those in any other location. In 2024, the ADL recorded 1,694 antisemitic incidents on college campuses, which is 84% higher than in 2023. Campus incidents comprised 18% of all incidents, a larger proportion than in any previous year since the statistics were first reported.

But the reality of darkness that threatens to overwhelm us has not been limited to the Jews of America. We have witnessed an unprecedented wave of political violence. On Rosh Hashanah, I acknowledged the political violence experienced by the Shapiro family in the Governor’s mansion in the 1st night of Passover. Melissa Hortman, the former House speaker of Minnesota, and her husband were murdered, and State Senator John Hoffman and his wife severely injured, by a gunman. And three weeks ago, Charlie Kirk, a father of two and the founder Turning Point, the largest and most influential conservative youth organization in the United States, was gunned down during a speech at Utah Valley University.

We have not only witnessed the darkness of violence; we have also witnessed the darkness of dehumanization.

We have witnessed countless incidents in which legal immigrants in this country have been swept up in ICE raids and deported without due process. We have seen that reported acts of violence and intimidation in the LGBTQ community has risen over 80% in the past two years, with harassment increasing most dramatically against those in the trans community. Other vulnerable communities in this country have faced intimidation and harassment.

This darkness is real and traumatic. It forces us to confront uncomfortable truths about the persistence of hatred, about how quickly the veneer of civilization can be stripped away, about how our neighbors' tolerance can evaporate when fear and scapegoating take hold.

Yet within this darkness, Jewish communities have made remarkable choices: we have insisted that our response to hatred cannot be *more hatred*; that our answer to dehumanization must be *greater humanization*. Yes, we must advocate for ourselves and for the well-being of the Jewish community first and foremost. But our moral voice cannot be **limited** to our concern for the Jewish community in this country. When one of us faces dehumanization as citizens of this country, each of our humanity is diminished.

So where does this leave us tonight, as we begin Yom Kippur 5786? How do we apply this ancient wisdom about light and darkness not merely to accept both, but to become agents of transformation—those who actively turn darkness into light?

The genius of Yom Kippur is not that it asks us to choose between light and darkness, but that it reveals the sacred process by which darkness becomes light. This is the deepest meaning of the rabbinic teaching that resolved the candle-lighting debate: we begin in darkness—acknowledging our failures, our mortality, our brokenness—but we kindle light against that darkness, demonstrating that transformation is always possible.

Consider the profound symbolism of our Yom Kippur liturgy itself. We began Kol Nidrei by nullifying our broken promises, our failed commitments—confronting the darkness of our incomplete selves. But this acknowledgment of failure is not the end of the story; it is the beginning of transformation. By sundown tomorrow, we will have moved through confession to commitment, from brokenness to wholeness, from darkness to light even as the shadows of the setting sun appear visible to us in this very Main Sanctuary. The very structure of these twenty-five hours teaches us that darkness is not a permanent condition, but a starting point for transformation.

This transformation is not magic—it requires our active participation. The communities that chose not to light candles understood something crucial: we cannot transform what we *refuse to see*. We must first sit with the reality of hatred in our world, the persistence of injustice, the pain we have caused others and ourselves. But the communities that insisted on lighting understood that there **was** *a next essential step*: once we have truly encountered the darkness, we become responsible for kindling light within it.

This is our calling as Jews in this moment: not simply to witness darkness, but to transform it. Not simply to celebrate light, but to create it where it does not yet exist.

When we see antisemitism rising on college campuses, our response cannot be merely to acknowledge the darkness. We must transform it by creating spaces where Jewish students can learn and thrive. When we witness violence against legal immigrants, we cannot simply sit with our discomfort. We must transform that darkness by advocating for justice and creating sanctuary. When LGBTQ+ youth face harassment, when elderly people experience isolation, when the poor go without basic needs while others have abundance—in each of these dark alleys that surround us, we are called to be the ones who kindle light.

This transformation begins with the recognition that our own experiences of darkness—our losses, our struggles, our moral failures—are not obstacles to bringing light but the very materials from which light can be kindled. The parent who has lost a child becomes an advocate for other grieving families. The person who has struggled with addiction becomes a guide for others seeking recovery. The community that has faced hatred becomes a voice for all who are marginalized.

This is the alchemy of Yom Kippur: it transforms our pain into purpose, our brokenness into bridge-building, our darkness into light. Not by denying the reality of suffering, but by refusing to let suffering have the final word.

As we move through these Days of Awe, let us remember the choice that Ofir Libstein made on October 7th—the choice to run toward the danger rather than away from it, to transform terror into love, to kindle light in humanity's darkest hour. His sacrifice reminds us that the transformation of darkness into light often requires great courage, but that it is a choice that is within our hands.

The debate about lighting candles on Yom Kippur was ultimately resolved not by choosing one practice over another, but by revealing the sacred process itself: we encounter darkness honestly, we kindle light courageously, and we become agents of transformation in a world that desperately needs healing.

This is our Covenant—not just with God but with the future itself. When we leave this sanctuary tomorrow night, when we hear the final blast of the shofar, we will carry within us not just the memory of this day but the power of transformation it has awakened in us. We will know that we are capable of taking the darkness that we have encountered—in ourselves, in our communities, in our world—and that we are capable of transforming it into light.

May this Yom Kippur awaken in each of us the sacred power of real change—of *Teshuvah*. May we leave here knowing that we have the capacity to turn our pain into purpose, our fear into courage, our darkness into light. And may the light we create together illuminate not just our own paths forward, but kindle hope in every dark corner where it is needed most.

*Gemar hatimah tovah.* May you be sealed for a good year—and may you be sealed for a year in which you transform darkness into light, not just for yourself, but for all who walk in darkness and yearn for dawn. *Kein yi’he ratzon—*Amen.