

Shabbat Parashat Yitro
Two Candles on Friday night

A question that often comes my way when I visit classes in our elementary grades or while I am leading Kabbalat Shabbat services in our school synagogue is: “Why do we light two candles on Shabbat?” It really is an excellent question and part of the answer is found in this week’s *parasha*/ Torah portion.

Parashat Yitro is the most dramatic Torah portion in the Torah. In its first section, the Children of Israel arrive in the Land of Midian and are greeted by Moses’ father-in-law, Yitro, after whom the *parashah* is named. After hearing a retelling of the events of the plagues and the Exodus from Moses, Yitro observes his son-in-law serving a “Chief Justice” of the Jewish people. Yitro advises Moses to appoint junior judges to deal with the people’s minor cases, while he would deal only with the most complex ones in order to prevent “burn out.” Moses agrees and the people then set off for Mount Sinai, where they camp at the foot of the mountain to receive the commandments of the Torah.

Once the Children of Israel have been ritually prepared for the revelation of Torah, with the mountain of God rumbling and covered with clouds and smoke, with thunder rolling through the air, God delivers the Ten Commandments to the Children of Israel. It is here that we find the beginning of our answer to the question about two candles on Shabbat. Commandment #4 of the Ten Commandments is on the subject of Shabbat. In our Torah portion, it begins with the words: “REMEMBER the Sabbath day, to keep it holy...” The first word is crucial here it provides one source for the answer to our question. However, this is only half of the answer because (and this may be a surprise to some) this is not the only time that the Ten Commandments are taught by Moses to the Children of Israel.

Sefer D’varim/The Book of Deuteronomy contains Moses’ farewell speech to his people before he dies and the people continues on, under the leadership of Joshua, into the Promised Land. The speech contains a selected retelling of several parts of the Torah that Moses wants to emphasize for this generation of the people, most of whom were not at Mount Sinai. Those that were at Sinai would have been very young at the time since the wandering after leaving the mountain went on for nearly forty years. However, in the case of the retelling Ten Commandments, the words for the Shabbat Commandment are not identical that what we will read and hear in our *parasha* this week. Instead, in *parashat* Va’Ethan, Commandment #4 begins with: “OBSERVE/GUARD the Sabbath day to keep it holy...” One word, as we know can make a lot of difference.

The Rabbis teach that, in fact, when God spoke the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, both of the words (Remember and Guard/Observe) were uttered simultaneously. However, it was impossible for Moses to do the same. Therefore, each of the written records of the Ten Commandments contains a different starting word. Regardless of how it is that two words for the Shabbat commandment came to us, it is the fact that the two words exist that serves as the answer to our question this week: we light two candles (at least, because there are families with the custom to light additional ones) on Friday evening to bring in Shabbat in order to recall the commandments to both REMEMBER and GUARD/OBSERVE the Sabbath.

When you gather together as a family to welcome Shabbat this week, take a moment to reflect on how it is different to “remember” and to “guard/observe” Shabbat. On the surface, one has a more intellectual or cognitive connotation, while the other implies action. What other meanings can you find? What will you do to fulfill both of these commandments during your Shabbat?

May the lights of Shabbat bring both physical and spiritual light into your lives for Shabbat this week!

Shabbat Shalom!