

Diwali

Significance:

Many events happened on this day! For instance Krishna pulled down the two arjuna trees standing after he was tied to a wooden mortar, Krishna also killed another demon whose name I cannot remember now. It is also the Hindu new year. Hindus are now at year 5121 this year.

The main reason why we celebrate this day is because Raam came back, from his exile, to his kingdom Ayodhya. The residents were so excited to see him come back after 14 years that they lighted his way into the kingdom with a row of lamps. This is where the festival gets its name: Deepawali (Deepa ~ lamp/light and wali ~ row). For short people call it Diwali.

Meaning is attached to this row of lights as well. Its significance is that we ask and welcome Raam into our homes. To say thanks for all we have (and also for all the things that were taken away from us, for our own personal development), to ask for blessings and protection, to keep the home a happy and spiritual place so no problems arise. And even more important is to welcome Raam into our hearts.

Rituals:

This festival is generally celebrated on the day. And also more prominent during the afternoon/night (the lamps are best seen in the dark).

Generally a new set of clothes are bought/worn on this day (but I am not very strict on this, I am thankful for what I have and I make sure what I wear are clean clothes). Black clothes are avoided as these symbolize a funeral. Girls normally shouldn't wear something that is shorter than the knee height and the abdominal and shoulder areas should also be covered. Generally girls wear a Punjabi, sari or some other form of traditional dress. But in SA, for convenience anything is fine as long as you're covered enough.

One generally takes a shower/bath before any of the prayers commence. And one should abstain from any meat, eggs, fish for at least a few days leading up to Diwali. Generally we don't have this issue as we are vegetarians already.

Depending on the number of people you're celebrating with, many varieties of sweetmeats, savories and snacks are made. We then share these with our friends and family. Doesn't need to be the same day, maybe you have a good friend at university, you could save some up for them and give them afterwards. All these snacks, savories and sweetmeats are offered to the lord before partaking of them.

On this day there is some recital of the story of Raam. I will outline a short version below for you to see what happened. (Check out the Ramayana for all the juicy bits, it's definitely worthwhile!)

Before the prayer starts, we lay out a plate full of the snacks etc. by the prayer place (you don't need to put all the snacks, just a few from each dish as representative). All the candles and other prayer items, like the raam story book are also set up. If you have a deity of lord Raam or Hanuman, or a picture of all of them (raam lakshman sita and hanuman), this will also be great. You can then do all they prayers in front of them.

At the start of all the prayers, a lamp is lighted inside the house (as per tradition) and Ganesha is worshipped. Ganesha is always prayed to before anything else commences. Any chant of Ganesha is said to initiate the prayer. I use this one:

Gajananam Bhuta Ganadhi Sevitam
Kapittha Jambu Palasara Bhaksitam |
Uma Sutam Shoka Vinasha Karanam
Namami Vignesvara Pada Pankajam | |

Meaning:

- 1: (I Salute) Sri Gajananam (Who is having an Elephant Face), Who is Served by the Bhuta Ganas (Celestial Attendants or Followers) and Others,
- 2: Who Eats the Core of Kapittha (Wood Apple) and Jambu (Rose Apple) Fruits,
- 3: Who is the Son of Devi Uma (Devi Parvati) and the Cause of Destruction of Sorrows,
- 4: I Prostrate at the Lotus-Feet of Vigneshwara (the God Who Removes Obstacles).

(<https://www.devshoppe.com/blogs/articles/shri-ganesha-shloka-with-meaning-gajananam-bhoota-ganadhi-sevitam>, got it from here, but it's everywhere around the internet)

We also have kirtan and bhajans (songs dedicated to Raam), if you don't know any, then the maha mantra is good enough.

When it gets dark, people then light lamps (I use the tea-light candles, the small ones you get at pep stores), and we place them especially at the gate and our main door (if it's a hazard, like at my place, neighbors kitty may just get curious and poke his nose somewhere he shouldn't, then I just put some on the windowsill outside, where nothing flammable is present). The gate and door are the most important places when a guest arrives, hence we try light these places up.

We then do arthi (concluding prayers), it's when we offer a burning incense stick to the lord when singing the arthi (you probs won't know many of the arthis, you can leave this part out, or sing the maha mantra, that's also good). When I see you again, we can talk more on this.

After we lit the lamps, it time for shanti paat (the peace prayer).

Om Dyo Shanti Antarik-sher-gam Shanti
Prthivii Shanti raapah Shanti rosha-dhayah Shanti
Vanaspat-yah Shanti Vishva-deva Shanti Brahma Shanti
Sarva-gam Shanti Shanti reva Shanti SaaMaa Shanti redhi
Om Shanti Shanti Shanti om

Meaning:

- 1: Om, Peace is in Sky; Peace is in Space (between Earth and Sky);
- 2: Peace is in Earth; Peace is in Water; Peace is in Plants;
- 3: Peace is in Trees; Peace is in Gods (presiding over the various elements of Nature); Peace is in Brahman (Absolute Consciousness);
- 4: Peace is pervading everywhere; Peace alone (which is outside) is in Peace (which is inside); May you be (established in) that Peace (and make your life fulfilled);
- 5: Om, Peace, Peace, Peace, om.

(https://greenmesg.org/stotras/vedas/om_dyauha_shanti.php, I made it more readable for you, this link has the real thing, if you're interested and its all over the internet too if you want to find a more readable version).

Once this is done, we partake of prasadam and all the snacks. We also give sweetmeats to everyone that are special to us.

People also burn fireworks to celebrate the day. If youre in Durban (or India), get ear muffs, for you and your dog and your cat. It's going to be a noisy night! We used to burn fireworks when my sister and I were small, but we phased out, as it terrified our dogs. So we don't light fireworks anymore.

Above and all, it does not have to be very rigid as what I described above, as long as you light a lamp in your house, and have some raam story recital, and even just one fruit to offer, then you've celebrated Diwali. The most important thing is to let god into your heart on the day.

Brief story of Raam:

Very long ago, in the kingdom of Ayodhya, there lived a king named Dhasaratha. He had three wives (Kaushaliya, kaikeya and sumitra). They bore him four sons namely, Raam, Bharat, Laksman and Shatrugan. They grew up and went to school, they learned the Vedas and military arts and a host of other subjects.

One day a sage names Vishwamitra came to Ayodhya, and asked king Dhasaratha to borrow Raam for disposing of a few demons that were disturbing his prayers and meditation in the forest. King Dhasaratha did not want to send his boy as he was afraid the demons would hurt Raam. But Raam and Vishwamitra knew Raam was god and no one can hurt him. Raam stepped up as he could see that Vishwamitra was getting upset and about to cast a curse on his father and said: "Please father, do let me go, we do not want to upset the holy sage. I will have my bow and arrows and if you wish it, I will take my brother Lakshman along to protect me." Dhasaratha finally agreed. Raam and Lakshman fought the demons in the forest and liberated them. Later Raam attended the swayamvar (marriage proposal ceremony) of Sita. This happened in king Janaka's palace. A swayamvar is where the presiding king sets up a challenge and invites all the princes. The prince that passes the challenge, gets the king's daughter as his bride. Sita was no ordinary woman, Just like Raam is Vishnu, Sita is Lakshmi (Vishnu's consort). Sita was already waiting for Raam to come and claim her. The challenge was to string the bow that was given to the kingdom by lord shiva a very long time ago.

All the princes tried to string this blessed bow, but strong as they were, not even one could lift it! Then came Raam's turn, and he walked around the bow three times and offered his respects to it. He then lifted it like it was a feather! He then hooked the string on one side of the bow, and was pulling it to string it to the other side of the bow. But Raam's pull was so strong that the tension in the bow snapped the bow in half! A thunderous roar emanated from this event and the oceans roared and lightning thundered. And Sita became Raam's bride.

They lived in Ayodhya for some time. Bharat was away in another kingdom sorting out kingdom administration. During this time king Dhasarata decided to make Raam king. Now, there was a maidservant to Kaikeya named Mantra. Mantra, using many persuasively bad words, poisoned Kaikeya's mind that her son, Bharat, should be the king and not Raam. So Kaikeya decided to throw her jewelry away, dress in sage's clothes and let her hair loose as if she was in mourning when someone has died.

When Dhasaratha saw this, he was confused and shocked and asked her what was wrong. Kaikeya then reminded him of the two boons that he owed her. She said that she wants to claim them now. With the first boon, she claimed from him that she wanted Bharat to be king and not Raam! Dhasaratha was devastated. The second boon which she wanted fulfilled was that Raam was to go on exile for fourteen years. Dhasaratha's heart failed. He lay sick in bed, thinking about how he is going to break the news to Raam.

Raam after hearing about his father's condition, came to his room as soon as he could. Dasaratha then told Raam what happened. But Raam was obedient to his parents and obeyed. He took on the sage's clothes and gave up his jewelry. Sita also joined as she would not stay back in the kingdom knowing her husband is in the forest. Lakshman also came along. Wherever Raam goes, Lakshman follows to protect Raam and Sita. So they entered the forests. All the residents of Ayodhya were depressed. They all decided to follow Raam. Ayodhya was empty. But Raam could not allow them to follow him, so one night, he snuck out with Lakshman and Sita and crossed the river and went on. When the residents came back, Dasaratha got happy, thinking that Raam returned, but they told

him, that Raam is now gone. Dasaratha passed away. So Raam set up a kutir (home) in the jungle. All the animals were cheerful and used to visit Raam and Sita.

Soon there was a demoness flying over the kutir and she saw Sita. Surpnaka, the demoness and sister to an even bigger demon named Ravana, then noticed how beautiful Sita was and also how handsome Raam was! She took the disguise of a pretty woman and started to go near Raam, trying to seduce him. But Raam told her: "I am already married to Sita and I will only take one wife, but here is my brother Lakshman, why not ask him?" Now, Lakshman could see through this demonesses disguise. So when Surpnaka came close to him, he cut off her nose! She immediately turned into her original ugly form and said that he will regret doing that while she was in tears. She flew off back to Ravana and told him of the incident. She also told him to take Sita as his prize as punishment to Raam and Lakshman. So Ravana hatched a plan. He found a demon friend who could change into various forms and told him to become a golden deer. He was then to lure Raam to catch him. When in the forest, he should imitate Raam's voice as if he is in danger. Lakshman would then run away from the kutir leaving Sita vulnerable.

So one day, a golden deer appeared in front of the kutir and mother Sita asked Raam to go get it for her. So Raam went but told Lakshman that he should not leave Sita's side no matter what happens. Raam chased the deer and eventually shot it. But lo and behold, the deer turned into a demon and yelled: "Lakshman, help!", in Raam's voice. Now Lakshman was anxious but he stood his ground. Mother Sita was terrified, she ordered Lakshman to go see. But he told her Raam can handle himself and stayed. But Sita was adamant and so Lakshman decided to go. Before he went he drew a line with his arrow around the kutir. He told Sita, not to cross this line as whatever tries to pass this line will be burned. She would not be harmed if she crossed this line. So Lakshman left to find Raam. He found Raam walking back and when Raam saw Lakshman, he got worried about Sita. So they both returned to the kutir to find that Sita was gone!

While Lakshman was away. Ravana pitched up in a sages disguise, looking for something to eat. Sita being a kind woman, brought out some fruit, but left it just before the line surrounding the kutir. Ravana told her it is not befitting of someone to offer food in this way and convinced her to step over the protective line! He then grabbed her and went to his vahana (airplane) and flew off with her. Sita dropped pieces of her jewelry out of the airplane so that Raam could find her. Jatayu the vulture and a loving devotee of Raam, spotted Sita and went to her aid. He fought with Ravana, but Ravana cut his wing and he fell to the earth with a great thud.

When Raam and Lakshman went looking for Sita, they found Jatayu half alive. Jatayu told Raam that the evil Ravana took her. Jatayu then passed away in Raam's arms. So Lakshman and Raam left the kutir and went in search of mother Sita. They came across the bears and monkey clan in the Kishkinda forest. This is where Raam met his eternal servant and most loyal devotee, Hanuman! The leader of the monkeys, Sugriva, sent all the animals in the forests to go look for mother Sita. They found some pieces of her jewelry to the south. So they all set off with Raam, Sugriva, Lakshman, Hanuman, and Jambavan (chief all the bears) leading the way.

They reached the southern tip of India, where they became puzzled as to where Ravana could be. Suddenly they heard a loud noise and saw a giant vulture named Sampati! He roared: "Look at this wonderful food that has come to my doorstep!" The monkeys got scared and started to scatter. Raam spoke to Sampathi telling him that his wife, Sita, was abducted by Ravana and if he saw anything. Sampati, after finding out that this was Raam, inquired if he saw Jatayu. Raam told Sampati the unfortunate events of Jatayu. Sampati began to cry and said to Raam: "That evil man Ravana has killed my Jatayu, my brother! I will help you in any way possible to find Sita. Ravana lives on an island to the south from here. There is but only one in your group which can make the trip there. That one is Hanuman. Remind him of his powers of which he has forgotten!" And Sampati went back into his cave to mourn the death of his brother.

And so it began, they urged Hanuman to remember his powers. After a while, Hanuman leapt into the air and let out a loud "Rahoooooo!". He had remembered his hidden powers! Without a delay, he flew over the ocean in the direction of the island with the kingdom of Lanka. Hanuman reached Lanka and made himself very small. He flew here and then there like a small insect. Then he found where Sita was. She was held captive in the Ashoka gardens. He then landed in the tree above Sita. Sita saw a ring drop and picked it up. She immediately burst into tears and said aloud: "From where comes this ring? It is the ring of my husband, Raam. Please show yourself!" Hanuman flew down from the tree and landed in front of her. He made himself into his normal size and told Sita: "Raam is searching for you and he is on his way with an army to rescue you." Sita's heart was now at ease. Ravana found out about Hanuman's presence and captured him. But Hanuman burned down half of Lanka before flying off back to Raam.

When Raam learned of the events in Lanka, he was fired up to wage war. All the animals and insects in the area helped to build a bridge over the ocean. They took stones and wrote the word 'Raam' on it and threw it into the water. The stones then floated and the entire army of monkeys and bears crossed over.

Raam sent a messenger to Ravana asking for the release of Sita and there would then be no war. But adamant Ravana decided against this. And so a great battle raged. Monkeys and bears fought the demon inhabitants of Lanka and many thousands perished. There were rivers of blood and many great demons came and went. Until Ravana had to appear himself to fight Raam. Many arrows, clubs, tridents and chakras collided and scattered the fields. And in the end Raam shot an arrow into Ravana's navel, which killed him. The sun rose on that forsaken land and the plants thrived and bore flowers and Sita was rescued.

Raam took Ravana's airplane and flew back to Ayodhya, as it was the last day of the fourteenth year of exile and Raam had to rush back! The inhabitants welcomed Raam back by lighting a row of lamps. They were all thrilled at having Raam in the kingdom again. Raam then became the ruler of Ayodhya.

The story continues but I feel this is a good point to stop.

Bhajans:

Jai jai sita jai shree raam, jai jai radhe jai siya raam]* x4

Raam lakshman Janaki ji, bolo shree hanuman ki x4

* x1

Jai jai raam ka naam barathe chalo, hanuman ki janda urate chalo x4

Have a blessed evening.

Jai shree Raam!