



Hi!

We're so excited that you are interested in hosting a Death Over Dinner - Jewish Edition. Talking about death and dying may seem like one of the more challenging conversations we can have, and yet it can be one of the most liberating. Follow the simple advice in this email and you will have everything you need gather your group and prompt a meaningful conversation. No experience or expertise needed! Simply gather your group and invite them to break bread together. In this letter, you will find:

- Suggested dinner invitation text, including the Read/Watch/Listen resources that you chose to share with your guests that you can share with your guests.
- Proposed conversation prompts for your dinner to be used as a guide the night of the gathering.
- Post dinner activities and ways to share your experience with the community.

Wishing you a most wonderful dinner,

The Death Over Dinner - Jewish Edition Team

Suggested Invitation Text

(Simply copy and paste into your email with your dinner details. We suggest keeping your dinner small, between 5-10 people.)

Hi **(Insert Name)**,

This could be the strangest dinner invitation I've ever sent, but read on - I think we are in for a memorable experience.

I recently stumbled on the work of a group of rabbis, theologians, doctors, palliative care and wellness experts who are working to break the taboo around conversations about dying. IKAR and Reboot have teamed up with the folks behind the project "Let's Have Dinner and Talk About Death" to create "Death Over Dinner - Jewish Edition." As the opening statement on their website notes.

"The way we die represents the most important conversation America isn't having.... Whether you are a Jewish insider, more on the margins, or Jewish-adjacent, we welcome you to tap into some age-old Jewish wisdom around grieving and ritual, living and dying."

The idea is that talking about death prepares us to approach life's most challenging moments, and also helps us articulate and affirm who we are and what we ultimately care about, giving us a great appreciation for life.

I would be honored if you would join me and **[a few guests (or) add specific names]** for dinner and conversation. Please note this isn't meant to be a morbid conversation, but a very human one, where we consider what we want, both in life and during its close. Let's talk about it - so we can lean into any fears we might have, get rid of inhibitions, and build deeper connections. To learn more about this one-of-a-kind project, visit <http://deathoverdinnerjewishedition.org/>.

Dinner Details

Date:

Time:

Location:

Bring (for potluck):

So that we have starting places for our shared conversations, I've selected a few "homework" assignments for all of us to read, watch, and listen to before we gather at the table. They are very short, but are engaging, informative, and inspiring.

Read

[Please Select Your Media](#)

Watch

[Please Select Your Media](#)

Listen

[Please Select Your Media](#)

I'm looking forward to sharing this special gathering with you.

Sincerely,

(Your Name)

Proposed Conversation Prompts (to be used at the table)

Note: These prompts are suggestions. They follow a simple pattern of breaking the ice, establishing a sense of gratitude for those who have come before us, then stepping into deeper conversation. Feel free to customize, embellish, create new ones, or completely disregard. We've found that it is important to focus on just a few critical questions, so you may choose to limit your prompts to three per dinner. We would love any/all feedback. Remember that this is not meant to be the only conversation you ever have about end of life. We simply hope to give families, friends, and individuals a starting point to consider the important questions we all face.

We have created these conversation prompts based "**Your Intention**":

I think being prepared for end of life is really important. We NEED to have this conversation.

To begin the evening

To start the evening, let's bring a sense of gratitude to the table and acknowledge our ancestors. Let's do a quick around the table introduction, to be completed with a "raise of the glass" to someone who is no longer with us, someone you admire deeply... and in no more than twenty words, share why you admire them. If you would prefer to light a candle in their honor, we have found that to be meaningful as well, some people do both.

The Meal is Underway, Deepening the Conversation with Text and Questions

Read this story aloud with your guests. We have provided some questions at the end to help guide a conversation.

(A word of introduction: Tefillin, or phylacteries, are black boxes worn on the head and arm during morning prayer services, and which used to be worn all day. Because they contain scrolls with sacred Jewish texts, they must be removed before a person enters a bathroom.

When Rabbi Yehudah was dying, the other Rabbis declared a public fast and offered prayers that God have mercy on him [meaning, save him from death]...

Rabbi Yehudah's maid went up to the roof and prayed: "The angels want Rabbi to join them in heaven and the people want him to remain with them. May it be the will of God that the people overpower the angels."

However, when she saw how often Rabbi Yehudah had to use the bathroom, each time painfully taking off his tefillin (phylacteries) and putting them on again, she prayed: "May it be the will of God that the angels overpower the people." As the Rabbis continued to pray, she took a jar and threw it off the roof. They stopped praying because they were startled by the noise, and in that moment, the soul of Rabbi Yehudah departed.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ketubot 104a

- What is motivating the prayers of the Rabbis and the maid in the beginning of this story?
- What causes the maid to change her prayer? Is that a morally justifiable action?
- Why do the Rabbis tell this story? What real-life tensions and challenges are highlighted by this struggle? Have you experienced something similar?

Just Before Dessert, Another Round of Questions

- Describe your ideal death. Where are you? Who is with you? What are you doing?
- Palliative care doctor Shoshana Ungerleider says that it's always too early to have this conversation, until it's too late. Have you shared this with your loved ones? Why not?

An Additional Idea for Dialogue

If you want to dig deeper into the conversation, use the final portion of your evening to discuss how you want your own life to end, and how you would like to support the end-of-life wishes of those you love and care about.

End every dinner with:

An Appreciation in the Round. This is a simple game to complete the conversation and the dinner. Someone begins by selecting a person on their left, and sharing one thing they admire about that person—the circle continues until everyone has been admired once. You might then want to offer gratitude for the food you have eaten, either the traditional Birkat HaMazon (Grace After Meals) or an impromptu blessing. We suggest that after the Round you break from the table, lounge on couches, or look at the stars, as a way to further sink into the connections and awareness experienced.

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We have created these conversation prompts based "**Your Intention**":

Death freaks me out, but I understand that difficult conversations are often the most important.

To begin the evening

To start the evening, let's bring a sense of gratitude to the table and acknowledge our ancestors. Let's do a quick around the table introduction, to be completed with a "raise of the glass" to someone who is no longer with us, someone you admire deeply... and in no more than twenty words, share why you admire them. If you would prefer to light a candle in their honor, we have found that to be meaningful as well, some people do both.

The Meal is Underway, Deepening the Conversation with Text and Questions

Read this excerpt aloud with your guests. We have provided some questions at the end to help guide a conversation.

Steve Jobs famously said the following in his Stanford commencement address:

When I was 17, I read a quote that went something like: "If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you'll most certainly be right." It made an impression on me, and since then, for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?" And whenever the answer has been "No" for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something.

Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure — these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.

In his words, we hear an echo of the approach of Rabbi Eliezer, who famously said: "Repent one day before your death." His students asked him: "Does a person know on which day he/she will die?" He said to them: "All the more so should one repent today lest he/she die tomorrow." Therefore all one's days will be spent in repentance. (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 153a)

– We could be talking about anything tonight: sex, football, politics. But we're talking about death. Why?

-When have you become more acutely aware of your mortality? Did this change your perspective or daily decisions? How does death or morality have a presence in your life?

Just Before Dessert, Another Round of Questions

Palliative care experts say that one of the most important things we can do when someone is dying is talk to the person, openly and honestly, and ask: "What is important to you now?"

-What are some obstacles to that conversation?

-What would you want someone to ask YOU about if you were in your final months?

An Additional Idea for Dialogue

If you want to dig deeper into the conversation, use the final portion of your evening to discuss how you want your own life to end, and how you would like to support the end-of-life wishes of those you love and care about.

End every dinner with:

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Proposed Conversation Prompts (to be used at the table)

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We have created these conversation prompts based "**Your Intention**":

I'm interested in exploring alternative Jewish approaches to death rituals and traditions.

To begin the evening

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The Meal is Underway, Deepening the Conversation with Text and Questions

Read this story aloud with your guests. We have provided some questions at the end to help guide a conversation.

This story from the Babylonian Talmud offers an explanation of some Jewish burial traditions.

They used to bring food to the house of mourning, the rich in baskets of gold and silver, the poor in baskets of willow twigs; and the poor felt ashamed. Therefore a law was instituted that all should use baskets of willow twigs.

Formerly they used to bring out the deceased for burial, the rich on a tall state bed, ornamented and covered with rich coverlets, the poor on a plain bier (or box); and the poor felt ashamed. Therefore a law was instituted that all should be brought out on a plain bier.

Formerly the expense of the burial was harder to bear by the family than the death itself, so that sometimes they fled to escape the expense. This was so until Rabban Gamaliel [who was very wealthy] insisted that he be buried in a plain linen shroud instead of costly garments.

And since then we follow the principle of burial in a simple manner.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Moed Katan: 27

– What values informed the establishment of these practices? Does this decision-making process resonate for you? Why or why not?

– What contemporary funeral practices feel out of alignment with this approach? In alignment?

Just Before Dessert, Another Round of Questions

-What values do you want as the driving force of your funeral and burial?

-What do you want your funeral to look and feel like?

An Additional Idea for Dialogue

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We have created these conversation prompts based "**Your Intention**":

I recently lost someone close to me and I'm looking for wisdom from the Jewish tradition that could bring me comfort.

To begin the evening

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We have created these conversation prompts based "**Your Intention**":

I am caring for a loved one who is dying and I am eager to have a real conversation about death.

To begin the evening

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The Meal is Underway, Deepening the Conversation with Text and Questions

Read this story aloud with your guests. We have provided some questions at the end to help guide a conversation.

...In that moment, when all we want to do is disappear, we're called to show up. And the community – when it wants to flee because our pain is so destabilizing, so disturbing – is called to see us, and offer comfort. Why? Because part of what it means to be a part of the human community is to realize that I hold you today; tomorrow you will hold me.

There is a story I love from the Talmud (Brakhot 5b) that beautifully demonstrates this point. Whenever any of Rabbi Yohanan's friends fell ill, he would go visit. R' Yohanan, who suffered devastating and disproportionate loss in his own life, would sit by his friend's side and say: 'Give me your hand.' I love that image – he was not afraid to touch someone, even in someone in deepest pain. The sick person would reach out his hand, and okmei – R' Yohanan would raise him up. Would he heal them, physically, or would he lift their spirits? We don't know. But somehow R' Yohanan's presence would elevate them.

One day, R' Yohanan himself became gravely ill. R' Hanina, one of his colleagues, went in to visit him. 'Give me your hand,' R' Hanina said. R' Yohanan gave him his hand and R' Hanina raised him up. But R' Yohanan was the one with healing power – why did he need R' Hanina at all? Couldn't he heal himself? The Rabbis explain: ain ha-vush ma-tir atz-mo mi-beit ha'a-su-rim – the prisoner cannot free himself from jail. Even those caring for their sick mothers and struggling friends need someone to care for them sometimes. In the very next story, R' Yohanan is back on his feet and on his way to visit R' Elazar, who has fallen ill, to bring comfort and healing with his presence.

Rabbi Sharon Brous, "The Amen Effect" Yom Kippur 2014

- Why did Rabbi Yohanan have the gift of healing?
- Given his powers, why did he need Rabbi Hanina when he was sick?
- Does this Talmudic story resonate, given your experience of being a caregiver or one cared for? What does the caregiver need to take care of her/ himself? (It's ok to answer – we asked.)

Just Before Dessert, Another Round of Questions

Palliative care experts say that one of the most important things we can do when someone is dying is talk to the person, openly and honestly, and ask: "What is important to you now?"

- What are some obstacles to that conversation?
- What would you want someone to say to YOU about if you were in your final months?

An Additional Idea for Dialogue

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We have created these conversation prompts based "**Your Intention**":

I am, or someone I love is, critically or terminally ill and I want to talk about what's happening openly, honestly and lovingly.

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The Meal is Underway, Deepening the Conversation with Text and Questions

Read this Hasidic story aloud with your guests. We have provided some questions at the end to help guide a conversation.

As the spirit of Rabbi Aaron of Zhitomir (Ji-to-mir) (c. 1750-1822) began its bonding with God, his students cried out a great cry. He said to them, "Why are you weeping? The ending of all people is to die."

They replied, "How do we not cry and not strike our heads? After you leave us we will be left like sheep without a shepherd, and the other righteous in our generation, their worship is very hidden and they will not reveal their practice as we are accustomed with you."

And he comforted them and said with these words, "You know that at the end of days the tzaddikim (righteous) who will be coming right before the Messiah will be greater than I, and everything they do will be more special..."

Deathbed Wisdom of the Hasidic Masters, Baron and Paasche-Orlow

– What is the difference between the way Rabbi Aaron and his students feel about his imminent death?

– How does the rabbi try to reframe the loss for his students? Do you think his words give them comfort? Why or why not?

– What are some of the challenges that arise when confronting one's own death or the death of a loved one? What stops us from discussing our thoughts about death with our loved ones?

-What is lost when we lose someone we love?

Just Before Dessert, Another Round of Questions

Palliative care experts say that one of the most important things we can do when someone is dying is talk to the person, openly and honestly, and ask: "What is important to you now?"

-What are some obstacles to that conversation?

-What would you want someone to ask YOU about if you were in your final months?

An Additional Idea for Dialogue

If you want to dig deeper into the conversation, use the final portion of your evening to discuss how you want your own life to end, and how you would like to support the end-of-life wishes of those you love and care about.

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We have created these conversation prompts based "**Your Intention**":

I am curious to learn about Jewish perspectives on death, dying and the afterlife.

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The Meal is Underway, Deepening the Conversation with Text and Questions

Read this story from Babylonian Talmud aloud with your guests. We have provided some questions at the end to help guide a conversation.

Rabbi Eliezer said: "Repent one day before your death." His students asked him: "Does a person know on which day he/she will die?" He said to them: "All the more so should one repent today lest he/she die tomorrow." Therefore all one's days will be spent in repentance.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 153a

– We could be talking about anything tonight: sex, football, politics. But we're talking about death. Why?

-When have you become more acutely aware of your mortality? Did this change your perspective or daily decisions? How does death or mortality have a presence in your life?

Just Before Dessert, Another Round of Questions

Read the following description of the Jewish approach to death:

The Jewish approach to death is to confront it directly. We don't dress up our dead to make them look like they did when they were alive; we bury them in a simple shroud with broken pieces of pottery over their eyes. We don't turn the work of burial over to professionals; as much as physically possible we shovel and place earth on the coffins ourselves. We don't head right back to work after a loved one's death; we sit shiva for a week, crying, laughing, sharing, grieving. Our rituals are designed not to shield us from the terror or pain of death, but to bring it to the surface.

-What message do you think the tradition is sending in shaping our ritual response to death this way? What are the challenges and blessings of this approach?

-Have you drawn on Jewish tradition when facing death or loss? In what ways?

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Post-Dinner Activities And Ways To Share Your Experience With The Community

Once you have had your dinner, we encourage you and your guests to visit [our Stories page where](#) you can share your experiences and view others'. We encourage you and your guests to visit [our Next Steps page](#) and make sure you have your Advance Care Directives complete, we also highly recommend that you indicate a Health Care Proxy, and confirm all of your paperwork is in order. Also, if you would like to stay connected to our ever-growing community where we exchange ideas, create events and share resources, join us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

Wishing you a most wonderful dinner,

The Death Over Dinner - Jewish Edition Team