



DEATH OVER DINNER

Jewish Edition

In partnership with InterfaithFamily

Host Manual

REBOOT 



INTRODUCTION

WHY TALK ABOUT DEATH OVER DINNER IN AN INTERFAITH SETTING?

A note from InterfaithFamily about this edition

The way we die—end of life decisions, death rituals, what happens after we die—is probably the most important conversation Americans aren't having. We believe that talking about death not only better prepares us to approach life's most challenging moments, but also helps us articulate and affirm who we are and what we ultimately care about, leaving us better able to embrace the mysteries of death and to appreciate life. Working with rabbis, theologians, wellness and palliative care experts, Death Over Dinner—Honeymoon Israel Edition provides an additional lens through which to build personal beliefs.

Because you're in a Jewish-y relationship, you've probably already had some boundary crossing conversations with close family members. Maybe their friends, maybe some strangers. But even in those, it's unlikely you've talked a lot about death. Our relationships are more modern now, and so is Judaism. Our families are now also queer, multi-racial, and not-white; our faiths and cultures may have various views or rituals surrounding death. As the world became "modern," the ever presence of death faded a little. It's always there, we just spend more time trying to solve it than grapple with it.

So, let's grapple together. And maybe, when you're confronted with death, it'll be a teeny tiny bit easier to negotiate as a couple, as an individual, and as a community. We're giving you the outline—stuff to think about, topics to explore, rituals to enact. You give us your whole self. Judaism is very specific on the mourning and very fuzzy on what happens next bit. Other faith backgrounds and cultures are the opposite. Everything is welcome at your tables—from how to mourn the death of a pet with your kids or death by police with your community.

We hope you'll let us know what things really resonate with you, what you want more of to help foster your conversation, as well as what did not resonate. So, go forth—eat, drink, and be...merry?

Both the website and the Conversation Cards below provide step by step recommendations to facilitate a meaningful conversation. Within this guide are some recommendations to make your event the most meaningful for participants.

SETTING THE TABLE: PLANNING AN EVENT

Why discuss death and mourning over a meal? The ritual of breaking bread with others slows us down, creates warmth and connection, and puts us in touch with our humanity—ideal conditions to share vulnerably about a hard topic.

Below are some recommendations to make your event the most meaningful for participants:

- **Tables of 6-8 people make for the most meaningful conversation; Host a big event, but make sure that the conversations remain intimate.**
 - If you plan on having more than 8 people, consider having multiple smaller tables with a designated table lead at each.

- **Create Space. Here is a list of items we have found to be useful to help create a welcoming and focused dinner space.**
 - Flowers
 - Memorial candle
 - Tea lights: Providing candles for each person to light at the beginning of the night is a helpful tool to sanctify the moment.
 - Matches
 - Stones
 - You can use stones in lieu of candles by placing a stone in the center of the table when setting an intention at the beginning of the meal. (The Jewish tradition is to put stones on graves rather than flowers. Perhaps to remind us that in the frailty of life, souls—like stones—endure.)
 - You can also have people write the name of someone they are memorializing or an intention they want to set.
 - Some have found a designated “talking stone” helpful in designating space for each person to speak.
 - Nametags or place settings/markers
 - Supplemental reading/resources
 - Not everyone may be familiar with the rituals and practices surrounding death in Judaism or the other religions or cultures represented at the table. Invite guests to bring educational materials to share.

- **Offer an additional space where individuals can go to should they need a break or alone time during the dinner.**

HOSTING THE DINNER

BEGIN WITH INTENTION

Drinks and appetizers are a great way to welcome guests and allow them time to transition from the hustle and bustle of their daily lives to the dinner environment. Take this time to introduce yourself to guests you may have not met before and connect with those you have.

When you are ready to begin, invite everyone to take a seat at the table(s) and begin the meal.

IF YOU ARE HOSTING ON SHABBAT:

The three Shabbat rituals of *lighting candles*, *sanctifying the evening with wine* and *blessing the bread* provide key moments to mindfully set-up the Death over Dinner conversation.

Below are some suggestions on how to use the rituals to frame the evening.

- **Lighting the candles on Friday night provides the space for setting intention before the start of the meal. In Jewish tradition, lighting candles at sundown on Friday is the last act of the workweek, the literal spark that carries us into the weekend.**
 - What brought you here tonight? What are you hoping to give or gain in this gathering?
- **Sanctifying the evening with wine is an opportunity to make a toast, a perfect way to highlight a memory or person as you begin. In Hebrew a toast is accompanied by the word *l'chaim*, to life. Kiddush is a way of celebrating life even as you reflect on death.**
 - Go around the table and hold up a glass, say their names and briefly share how they have impacted you.
- **Blessing the Bread connects us to the process of work that has to happen in order for the challah to get to our table. The possibility and the abundance of Shabbat comes with the responsibility to work to make a better world the other six days of the week.**
 - Discuss the ways everyone can communicate and share this evening that will keep the space sacred, and connect everyone more deeply to each other.

FACILITATE CONVERSATION

Use the conversation cards to guide your experience. On one side of each card you'll find a theme and context to frame the experience. On the opposite side, you'll find questions to help prompt a meaningful conversation. Have someone at the table read the text on the first side aloud. You can then pick some questions on the reverse to discuss. Start with the "Create Space" card and end with the "Gratitude" card. From there, pick two to four prompts that suit your guests and craft the content you want. This is your conversation. Allow yourselves at least 1 ½ -2 hours.

HOSTING THE DINNER

Here are some tips for a meaningful discussion guided by the conversation cards:

- **Review the cards before your guests arrive, and select prompts that resonate the most with you and the kind of discussions you'd like to create.**
- **Consider framing certain prompts with parameters that might add depth or levity, depending on the question. For example, "answer this question in one word," or "act out your response to this question."**
- **Push but don't shove. Not everyone has to answer every question or participate in every part of the conversation.**
- **Take turns. Pass around the cards and allow your guests to choose a prompt to lead.**
- **It may take some time to warm up to the conversation. That is ok! Allow yourself the time to ease into the conversation.**
- **If you have a large group with multiple tables, consider having table leads. It's helpful to have people at each table prepared to facilitate the conversation. This can mean identifying people beforehand to welcome their small group or asking someone in the moment to serve as a table facilitator.**

END WITH GRATITUDE

Ending the dinner with a poem, song, or meditation can be an effective way of finding closure on the conversation. Remember dessert! Be conscious of your guests' energy and be sure to conclude with a taste of something sweet and perhaps a "l'chaim", a toast to life!

IF YOU ARE HOSTING ON HAVDALAH

The end of Shabbat is marked by a brief ceremony, *Havdalah*, meaning separation. Havdalah creates a literal separation in time between *kodesh*, the holiness of Shabbat, and *chol*, the everyday weekday, using a special set of sensory-engaging rituals involving wine, sweet spices, and candlelight.

Finish your Death Over Dinner with Havdalah to mark the end of the gathering and reset for the new week.

HOSTING THE DINNER

BEST PRACTICES FOR A SUCCESSFUL DINNER

You might be one of those people more willing than others to have this conversation. Hopefully this will give you the space to bring them in.

- **Ask that all participants speak in "I" language from personal experience.**
- **Make an effort to be mindful of the intention behind your speech; are you speaking to be helpful and supportive or to hear yourself speak, impress others, or impose your own view or experience on other students?**
- **Everyone will hear and be heard. We recognize that everyone brings their own wisdom and life experience to the table, and that we need everyone's wisdom to move towards a hidden wholeness that is greater than the sum of its parts.**
- **Everyone is entitled to time in and time out. If someone wishes to step out, respectfully allow them that time.**
- **Maintain confidentiality.**

SOME FRAMING NOTES FROM MICHAEL HEBB, FOUNDER OF DEATH OVER DINNER:

- **Everyone is already having this conversation in their head. What kind of invitation can you give them so they can start to have it with you or with others.**
- **This conversation is fueled by vulnerability. You have an edge. Everyone does. The way this conversation works best is that you don't sit on the edge, but take a moment to step over it to say and go someplace new.**
- **This is not a great place for phones.**
- **Be conscious of the sound of the volume in the room. The low hum of everyone at all of the tables. There is space for everyone to speak and create space at our own tables if we are aware of the overall sound we are generating. Think of a low hum.**

PARTNERS

Reboot, InterfaithFamily, and Honeymoon Israel have partnered to bring you this edition of the Death Over Dinner: Jewish Edition toolkit. Each organization cares deeply about providing experiences that allow participants to have meaningful conversations that often require dedicated space and time. We created this expansion of Death Over Dinner: Jewish Edition to explore death and its rituals and traditions across a spectrum of faiths, culture, and spiritual practice. We recognize that every single person around this table will bring something unique, important, and valuable to the conversation. We hope that you feel loved and supported throughout this experience.



REBOOT affirms the value of Jewish traditions and creates new ways for people to make them their own. Inspired by Jewish ritual and embracing the arts, humor, food, philosophy, and social justice, we produce creative projects that spark the interest of young Jews and the larger community. Among our productions are events, exhibitions, recordings, books, films, DIY activity toolkits, and apps. Since our inception, 578 network members, over 1,000 community organization partners, and hundreds of thousands of people have looked to Reboot to rekindle connections and re-imagine Jewish lives full of meaning, creativity, and joy. Other Reboot projects include 10Q, the National Day of Unplugging and Six Word Memoirs Jewish Edition.



DEATH OVER DINNER was originally designed in the U.S. by Michael Hebb and Angel Grant to encourage people to have conversations about end of life at the kitchen table rather than in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), when it's often too late. DOD is an interactive website that encourages conversation to start with family and friends while breaking bread, and well in advance of an accident or an emergency when people are overwhelmed or unable to communicate. DOD educates people on the value of making decisions about their wishes, and expressing them to their loved ones by inspiring a series of uplifting and interactive dinners to transform the seemingly difficult conversation about death into an intimate, shared experience. DOD provides a range of tools, reading and support materials, as well as tips to get the conversation started. Dinner party hosts choose the guests and the menu and let the wine and conversations flow.

PARTNERS



IKAR launched in 2004 in an effort to reclaim the vitality and relevance of Jewish religious practice and reimagine the contours of Jewish community. IKAR is seen as a positive and proactive response to shifting trends in affiliation and communal engagement in the Jewish community, inspiring a diverse community to help reanimate Jewish life through imaginative engagement with ritual and spiritual practice and a deep commitment to social justice. Fusing piety and hutzpah, obligation and inspiration, we are harnessing an untapped energy in the Jewish community, attracting and mobilizing Jews to contribute their vast intellectual and creative resources to address real world concerns effectively and unapologetically. In addition to establishing a vital presence in Los Angeles, we have also become a leading model of engaging, authentic, resonant Jewish life that is inspiring change in synagogues and communities around the country.



INTERFAITH FAMILY helps young couples and families explore how they can confidently do Jewish and connect with Jewish community in ways that work for them.



HONEYMOON ISRAEL provides immersive trips to Israel for locally based cohorts of couples that have at least one Jewish partner, early in their committed relationship, creating communities of couples who are building families with deep and meaningful connections to Jewish life and the Jewish people

Death Over Dinner was created by Reboot, IKAR, and Michael Hebb and is supported by a generous grant from the Jewish Community Foundation of Los Angeles

