

**Generation to Generation**  
Jewish Families Talk About Death

**A Teaching Guide**

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## Introduction

When a loved one dies, we need to mourn and remember, and we need to help others mourn and remember. Children feel these needs as strongly as adults. *Generation to Generation* is a 35-minute documentary film that helps people of all ages assume the roles of mourner and comforter. *Generation to Generation* shows Jewish families how to mourn, comfort, and remember through communication between generations.

In the film, parents and children who have endured the loss of a dearly loved relative or friend tell their stories and share the wisdom they developed through the experience. A rabbi, a grief counselor, and a funeral home director explain Judaism's beliefs and rituals regarding death. They also discuss the psychology of mourning and remembering for children and for adults.

The families and professionals in *Generation to Generation* encourage parents to speak openly to their children about death and allow children to participate in the rituals of mourning and comforting. The film encourages children to ask questions about death and mourning, and it gives parents some ways to answer those questions. In the words of children themselves, the film shows that participation in mourning helps children assume full membership in their families and accept death as a part of life.

## Teaching with Generation to Generation

The film is roughly divided into four segments on four basic themes. The goal of discussing the film with a family or a group of families is to facilitate communication between generations about these four themes.

### Themes

Your group may focus on any one, or all, of these four themes during the discussion.

1. Death is Part of Life: Teaching children that death is a part of life
2. Honesty: Being honest with children about death and including them in mourning
3. Ritual: Understanding Jewish rituals around death and participating in them as a family
4. Mourning and Memory: Carrying the memory of a loved one throughout one's own life

Discussion can take place either at the stopping points suggested in this guide, or after the group has viewed the entire film.

### Note to Group Leaders

Before the meeting or class, group leaders should read this guide, then watch the entire film. Those planning to stop the film at the suggested stopping points should watch it again, this time stopping the film at those points.

You may wish to refer to *The Jewish Mourner's Handbook* (Behrman House, 1992) during the discussion of ritual, as group members may ask questions about Jewish customs and rituals that *The Jewish Mourner's Handbook* addresses. You may also want to gather some helpful local information—the names and phone numbers of local grief counselors, support groups, and rabbis—to distribute to group participants.

# Opening

## This Teaching Guide

This teaching guide suggests ways to initiate dialogue between generations about the film's four themes. The following material is divided into three sections, with a bibliography.

“Opening” offers a brief opening discussion before the film. This discussion focuses the group on the themes that will be addressed in the later discussion.

“Discussion Themes” suggests how to lead a group in discussion of the film's four themes. For each of the four themes, this guide offers:

- An optional stopping point
- A summary of the core understanding the group should develop through discussion of the theme
- Key quotations that reinforce the core understanding. The group leader can read these aloud or write them on the board to help focus the discussion.
- Questions to ask adults to generate discussion about the theme
- Questions to ask children to generate discussion about the theme. (When appropriate, these are the same as the questions for adults.)

“Closing” offers a brief concluding discussion and several appropriate readings. The readings provide a poignant closure to the discussion.

The bibliography lists selected books on Jewish approaches to death and mourning. These books further explain Jewish rituals around death and Jewish philosophies about death and mourning.

To open the discussion, tell the group that they will be learning how Jewish families can cope effectively with loss of a loved one, and how to behave in a caring and empathetic way toward others who have suffered such a loss. Emphasize the value of family and community relationships in helping people face the death of a loved one, and how facing loss together can strengthen families and communities. To initiate a brief introductory discussion that helps set a frank but soothing tone for the later group discussion:

- Explain that there is no right or wrong answer to any question asked during the discussion.
- Ask the group members to say their names and what they would like to learn from the film and the discussion. As leader, you should speak first to break the ice.
- Open the topic widely—for example, you can tell a story about being a child and not knowing what to say to an elderly neighbor whose spouse died. It is not necessary to delve into great emotional detail; rather, the goal is to show that nearly everyone has had to perform the role of mourner or comforter.
- Write on the board some of the words the group associates with death, mourning, and comforting. These words are likely to reflect the anxiety, fear, and sadness that are the natural outcomes of losing a loved one.
- During the later discussion, you can write new words that are more comforting and positive on the board. Then you can pair words that were not previously associated, such as “fear and knowledge,” or “pain and comfort” by drawing lines between them.

# Discussion Themes

## 1. Death is Part of Life

### Optional Stopping Point

5 minutes into the film. David Techner, the funeral home director, says: “Nobody was talking to them about it. What’s wonderful, is that we are.”

### Core Understanding

A generation ago, many adults did not talk to children about death. Thus, it is difficult for many of today’s adults, now with children of their own, to teach their children how to mourn and how to comfort others. Understanding adults’ ambivalence about these roles is necessary, so adults and children can learn to engage in open dialogue about death, mourning, and comforting.

### Key Quotations

- *It is very difficult for parents to talk to children about death and dying, because it is the ultimate in loss of control.*
- *Kids need, and kids want, to be part of life. And death is a part of life.*
- *It’s still scary to know the truth, but it’s scarier if you don’t know.*

### Questions for Adults

What is your first memory of someone dying? What did adults explain well? What could they have explained differently?

What were your fears and concerns about death and mourning when you were a child? In what ways are they similar or different now?

### Questions for Children

Have adults talked to you about death? If so, what did they say? How did you react?

## 2. Honesty

### Optional Stopping Point

12 minutes after re-starting the film. A boy says, “I don’t know the prayers, but I sort of pray in my mind, and I think they understand, and that’s the same kind of thing.”

### Core Understanding

Sadly, the truth about death includes uncertainty (“I don’t know why \_\_\_\_ is going to die/has died”) and pain (“I am very sad that I will not see your grandfather again”). Fortunately, children will see strength in adults’ ability to tell sad or confusing truths, and children feel most secure when adults are honest with them. This honest approach also suggests that children should be allowed to attend funerals. Like adults, children derive comfort from the togetherness and remembering they experience at a funeral.

### Key Quotations

- *Our kids could handle the truth about everything, much better than [they could handle] half-truths or silence.*
- *It’s not whether the child should come to the funeral, but how the child should come to the funeral.*
- *He’s still here, [because] I can think of him.*

### Questions for Adults

When did you attend your first funeral?

Have you chosen to bring your children to funerals? Why?

What can you say to prepare a child to attend a funeral?

### Questions for Children

Have you ever been to a funeral? Were you afraid to go? What was it like?

### 3. Rituals

#### Optional Stopping Point

10 minutes after re-starting the film. A girl says, “It was scary, but it was also comforting to know that she was going into the ground, probably because I knew that she was safe.”

#### Core Understanding

Judaism treats the body of a human being, made in the image of God, as sacred. Treating the body of a loved one with respect comforts the living. This process also begins the community’s expression of support for the bereaved.

Participation in the cemetery service and burial, after the funeral, often has two results. First, the visceral experience of seeing a casket lowered helps a mourner comprehend the finality of death. Second, participation enables both children and adults to feel pride in living up to the responsibility to attend to the deceased loved one and to be supportive members of a family and community.

#### Key Quotations

- *Something even more sacred than a Torah scroll . . . is a human being.*
- *She was done suffering, now that she died.*
- *So long as we live, he too shall live, for he is now a part of us, as we remember him.*

#### Questions for Adults and Children

How can we treat the human body as if it is sacred, in life and in death?

What choices have you made (or what choices have been made for you) about going to a cemetery after a funeral?

What do you think happens to a soul after death?

### 4. Mourning and Memory

#### Optional Stopping Point

13 minutes after re-starting the film, at the film’s conclusion.

#### Core Understanding

Children should be permitted to grieve in their own style. Similarly, children should be permitted to comfort in their own style, but they can be guided about what to say and reassured that it is fine not to say a lot. When children hear adults remembering the loved one who has died, they learn that we carry the memory of a loved one with us. Faith in Judaism and a feeling of belonging to the Jewish people help adults and children carry the memory of a loved one with them and live up to that memory.

#### Key Quotations

- *It’s important to let [children] find their own way of comforting, and I think it makes them better people.*
- *When you die, your spirit stays with the people you love.*
- *That I was Jewish made a difference when she died—it helped me.*

#### Questions for Adults

How does Judaism create a ritual structure that helps families mourn and remember?

#### Questions for Adults and Children

In what ways have people comforted you after a loss?

What are some comforting ways to acknowledge an adult’s and a child’s loss?

How can we meaningfully commemorate the lives of loved ones we have lost?

## Closing

To close the discussion, review the words you wrote on the board before the film and the discussion. Ask if anyone would like to add any new words on the board, or draw any further connections between words already there.

Hand out the bibliography and other helpful materials, such as the names and phone numbers of local grief counselors, support groups, and rabbis.

You may wish to close the meeting by reading one or both of these selections: one from our most ancient literature and the other from a great contemporary poet.

### Psalm 121

I lift my eyes to the mountains;  
What is the source of my help?  
My help comes from Adonai,  
Maker of heaven and earth.

God will not let your foot give way;  
your Protector will not slumber.  
See, the Protector of Israel  
neither slumbers nor sleeps!

God is your guardian,  
God is your protection at your right hand.  
The sun will not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night.

God will guard you from all harm  
God will guard your soul,  
your going and coming,  
now and forever.

From Patuah Sagur Patuah (Open, Closed, Open)  
Yehuda Amichai

How should you stand at a *yizkor* ceremony?  
Should you stand straight or bowing,  
Neat like a tent or unkempt as a mourner might be,  
With head lowered like the guilty,  
or head raised defiantly against death,  
Eyes open and still like the eyes of the dead themselves,  
or with eyes closed to search the stars within?  
And what is the best time to remember?  
At noon when shadows are hidden under our feet,  
or at twilight when shadows lengthen like the longings  
without beginning or end, like God?

translated from Hebrew by Rabbi William Cutter

## Jewish Mourning: A Selected Bibliography

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