



Facilitator's Guide Opening the Heart: Becoming a Grandparent

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About *Opening the Heart*

Opening the Heart is a five-session, discussion-based course that invites grandparents to reflect on their new and evolving roles through the lens of Jewish texts, stories, contemporary essays, and creative sources such as art, music, and film. The course also integrates insights from child development and educational theory.

Grandparents explore personal stories, family history, and hopes for the future as they shape meaningful relationships with both their adult children and grandchildren.

A wide range of grandparents across North America with diverse families and grandchildren of all ages have participated in *Opening the Heart* classes. For the facilitator, it is truly a joy to engage people in deep learning and reflection about their cherished families. Participants in *Opening the Heart* have laughed and cried together, explored a range of ideas and sources entirely new to them, and most of all, deepened their connections to their children and their children's children.

Opening the Heart is organized around the following principles:

1. Grandparenting is a craft that we can improve with practice.
2. Becoming a grandparent has the potential to open a person to affective and spiritual forces that they may not have noticed before.

3. It is a powerful and significant place to hold a position between the generations that came before and the generations that are forming the future.
4. Grandparents who learn to leverage their memories of the past with the needs of the current moment can serve as influential educators for their children and grandchildren.
5. Grandparenting is a real-life lesson on limits, boundaries, and potential.

Role of the Facilitator

The late 19th- to early-20th century philosopher and educator John Dewey taught that deep learning occurs when learners have a chance to reflect upon their experiences — of their lives and during the process of learning. We want *Opening the Heart* participants to have lots of time for deep thinking and reflection. That is why it is critical to think of yourself as a facilitator, rather than a teacher. In other words, you are the one who makes it easy for everyone else to speak.

To understand the role of the facilitator, it might be useful to start with what this course is not. *Opening the Heart* is not:

1. A family education class for how to celebrate Jewish holidays.
2. A handbook with an approach to grandparenting to be followed as a guide.
3. A place to solve problems that often emerge within the context of a multi-generational family.

Rather, it is a course that encourages ideas about grandparenting to emerge organically from the study of texts and through conversation. Instead of having a set agenda of items that must be covered, the facilitator focuses on what people are saying about the texts and to each other.

The success — and value — of the course relies on participants doing three core learning practices together:

1. Reflecting on their own experiences.
2. Working hard as a group to understand and decode texts that are often complicated. These include Jewish texts, as well as psychological, philosophical, and literary sources.
3. Applying the ideas to their lives, surfacing challenges and offering encouragement and “team support” to try out new actions or behaviors with their families.

Sometimes, you, the facilitator, will want to present the context for a Jewish text — for example, Jacob’s reference on his deathbed to his grandsons as “mine” (as if they are his own children) — and then help participants read through and grasp it, and perhaps even help them discover ways they might share it with their families.

You may also want to ask participants questions about their pasts and memories of their own grandparents that connect them to the text. As the participants reflect on what the texts say, you will also want them to consider how they modify what they currently do or say to their children or try something new.

For example, a lesson about family memories might include a question about beloved family foods and recipes, giving time for people to describe the food and its tastes, smells, and textures, and who it makes them think of.

Ideally, you will be a sensitive and non-judgmental listener as participants share stories, behaviors, and issues that have emerged in their families. From the outset, assure participants that this is a safe space and the group will hold their comments in confidence.



SESSION 1

Opening the Heart: Becoming a Grandparent

What Makes a Grandparent?

Introduction

Opening the Heart is a five-session, discussion-based course that invites grandparents to reflect on their new and evolving roles through the lens of Jewish texts, stories, contemporary essays, and creative sources such as art, music, and film.

Together, participants explore personal stories, family history, and hopes for the future as they continue to shape meaningful relationships with their adult children and grandchildren.

In the first session, participants explore textual references to grandparenthood and share their own experiences of this role, including their joys, hopes, and fears as they build relationships with their grandchildren.

Session Opener

Share with a partner or the group.

1. What was your reaction upon hearing you were going to be a grandparent? Or, what did you think when you heard your child was going to be a parent?
2. What is your most vivid memory of your own grandparents?
3. How did you come to get your grandparent name?

Texts for Discussion

Let's compare two texts, one biblical and one contemporary. The first tells of Jacob meeting his grandsons for the first time. The second shows how a grandparent can become a safe harbor for a grandchild.

Text 1: Genesis (Bereshit) 48:1–20

Some time afterward, Joseph was told, "Your father is ill." So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

When Jacob was told, "Your son Joseph has come to see you," Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed.

And Jacob said to Joseph, "El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and blessed me,

and said to me, 'I will make you fertile and numerous, making of you a community of peoples; and I will assign this land to your offspring to come for an everlasting possession.'

Now, your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, shall be mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine no less than Reuben and Simeon.

But progeny born to you after them shall be yours; they shall be recorded instead of their brothers in their inheritance.

I [do this because], when I was returning from Paddan, Rachel died, to my sorrow, while I was journeying in the land of Canaan, when still some distance short of Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath" — now Bethlehem.

Noticing Joseph's sons, Israel asked, "Who are these?"

And Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." "Bring them up to me," he said, "that I may bless them."