



Opening the Heart to One Another Facilitator's Guide

By Dr. Jane S. Shapiro

With thanks to Orot: Center for New Jewish Learning

<https://www.orotcenter.org/>

Introduction

In his essay "Making Room For Each Other In Interfaith Families," Roger Talbott, a retired Methodist Minister, writes beautifully about the challenges and opportunities presented when families of different faith traditions come together. "A good host says (and means), 'My house is your house.' A bad host makes you feel like an intruder in a thousand thoughtless ways."

Through this three-part learning series for Jewish and non-Jewish grandparents of children being raised in multifaith households, we hope to create a "my house is your house" atmosphere where grandparents from different faith traditions can share their beliefs, stories, and dreams. We hope it will create the space for grandparents to share their concerns and fears as they navigate an oft-challenging intergenerational landscape.

In this series of learning conversations, we will:

1. Discuss how a grandparent's active participation in the life of their family can play a significant role in the future development and resilience of their grandchildren.
2. Reflect on the place grandparents hold within their family as a link to the past and a foundation for the future.
3. Engage honestly with one another about the ways in which our different faith traditions can intertwine and support one another as we work to strengthen our families.
4. Provide a safe space to learn about each other's faith traditions, customs, and rituals.

Timing

Each session will be 75–90 minutes.

Materials

There are a variety of sources available to you to construct a lesson. The main goal of engaging participants in reading, thinking, and discussing together leaves you room for your own style of facilitation. You may want to begin by reading a text together as a group and then discussing. Or divide participants into smaller groups so more people have a chance to speak. You might also want to use one of the images or a poem or blog memoir for quiet reflection to begin the class.

All biblical citations are drawn from Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/>



Photograph courtesy of Pexels

Session One

In Session One, we will consider the natural world as a way to think of our unique roles as grandparents.

I. Story Circle: “The Annunciation”

Ask *participants*: What do you remember about the moment you first learned you were going to become a grandparent?

Facilitator Note

Story Circle is an opportunity for participants to speak in pairs or in groups of three. If you are teaching on Zoom, breakout rooms will work well. This activity should last for about ten minutes. Because there is a lot of material to cover, it is not necessary to do a long debrief of what people said or heard from one another. You may want to point out that sometimes significant and moving events happen in our lives that we can remember with a sense of wonder and joy and which can also be an opening to relate a poignant family story.

You may want to send the link to Suzanne Simard’s TED talk to participants as a teaser for the first session, asking them why they think you shared it for a class on grandparenting.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Un2yBgIAxYs>

Alternatively, you can ask if anyone enjoys taking walks or hiking with their grandchildren and what that experience has taught them about being a grandparent. Discuss the ways it is different from a parent taking a child for a walk.

Explain briefly what midrash is — a literary form of expression and interpretation that adds to the written meaning of Jewish text, often in inspiring and educational ways. You can also use these photographs as a “visual midrash” — the interpretation of written text through art — asking participants to look at the images for a minute or two, and then share their impressions. Slowing down the gaze often allows for interesting reflection.

II. Exploring a Metaphor from the Natural World

Ask: As you study the two photographs of trees and forest, what comes to mind?



Photograph courtesy of Jane Shapiro



Photograph courtesy of Jane Shapiro

From “Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest” by Suzanne Simard

Mother trees are the biggest, oldest trees in the forest. They are the glue that holds the forest together. They have the genes from previous climates; they are homes to so many creatures, so much biodiversity. Through their huge photosynthetic capacity, they provide food for the whole soil web of life. They keep carbon in the soil and above ground, and they keep water flowing. These ancient trees help forests recover from disturbances. We can't afford to lose them.

When older trees die, they form a nutrient base for the next generations of trees, mosses and ferns.

Discussion Questions

1. What thoughts or impressions do you have at this moment about your own family tree?
2. In what ways do you think that the older branches of your family tree have affected you personally?
3. As you locate yourself on the tree and see younger branches, how do you feel?

Facilitator Note

The questions above may take about 10–12 minutes for good reflection.

Before introducing the following texts, share with participants that Torah study is meant to be an open exchange of ideas about Jewish sources— where all participants are engaged and all have valuable insights to offer — and to encourage imagination and interpretation. Anyone who was asked to read poetry in high school (which is everyone), has what it takes to look at a text and find metaphors and gaps where something invites more inquiry.

III. Trees in the Biblical Tradition

Proverbs 3:18

She (the Torah) is a tree of life to those who hold on to her; those who hold her fast are called happy.

Revelation 2:7

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

Discussion Questions

1. What is my relationship at this moment in my life to the traditions of my family? What family stories and history do I hold dear?
2. As I look upon the years I have spent raising and nurturing a next generation, what aspects of my tradition have guided me?
3. What makes me feel rooted? What hopes and dreams do I have for my grandchildren as they join the branches of our family tree? See Supplement on Tamarisk trees below for more ideas and inspiration.



Opening the Heart to One Another

Session One

Source Sheet

I. Story Circle: "The Annunciation"

II. Exploring a Metaphor from the Natural World



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Torah Study: Abraham and Sarah as the First Ancestors

Planting the Roots of Traditions That Welcome All to Our Homes

Genesis 18 Torah Portion – Vayera

God appeared to him [Abraham] by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot.

Looking up, he saw three figures standing near him. Perceiving this, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, he said, “My lords! If it please you, do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree.

And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; then go on—seeing that you have come your servant's way." They replied, "Do as you have said."

Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Quick, three *seahs* of choice flour! Knead and make cakes!"

Then Abraham ran to the herd, took a calf, tender and choice, and gave it to a servant-boy, who hastened to prepare it.

He took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them, and he waited on them under the tree as they ate.

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he replied, "There, in the tent."

Then one said, "I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!" Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him.

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having her periods.

And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "Now that I've lost the ability, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?"

Then God said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?'"

Is anything too wondrous for God? I will return to you at the same season next year, and Sarah shall have a son."

Midrash Avot de Rabbi Natan, Chapter 7

An interpretive understanding of the Talmudic Book *Pirke Avot*, "Our Ancestors' Wise Sayings"

Joseph B. Joḥanan of Jerusalem said: Let your house be opened wide, and let the poor be members of your household;

Abraham, however, did not act so. He went abroad, and when he met wayfarers he brought them to his home. Even to him who was unaccustomed to eat wheaten bread he gave wheat bread, to him who was unaccustomed to eat meat he gave meat, and to him who was unaccustomed to drink wine he gave wine. Not only that; but he went and built large mansions along the roadways and placed in them a supply of food and drink, so that whoever entered ate and drank and blessed Heaven. Therefore was he granted happiness; and whatever the heart desired was to be found in Abraham's home, as it is stated, And Abraham planted a tamarisk-tree in Beer-sheba.

Rabbinic Wordplay on Radical Hospitality

ESHEL- Achilah (Food), *Shtiyah* (Drink), *Linah* (Place to Sleep)

IV. Thinking more Expansively about Our Family Trees and the Significance of Hospitality

Roger Talbott, Making Room For Each Other In Interfaith Families



Photograph courtesy of Roger Talbott

"Grandpa, will you get your ice cream in a dish or in a cone?" my then-seven-year-old granddaughter, Amina, asked. We were walking to the ice cream parlor in the little town in Connecticut where her mother was the rabbi of the local temple.