



Webinar Discussion Guide

Filling the Empty Chair: Honoring and Remembering Grandparents and Loved Ones Who Have Died

By Rabbi Melanie Levav, Shomer Collective
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Purpose

Grief for the death of a loved one is often most acute at holiday times when their participation in traditions is woefully missed. Jewish wisdom can support us in these moments by creating opportunities to make their memory for a blessing. This guide provides prompts for discussion of the JGN webinar, *Filling the Empty Chair: Honoring and Remembering Grandparents and Loved Ones Who Have Died*, led by Rabbi Melanie Levav of Shomer Collective. Grandparents, intergenerational groups, and program facilitators can view the recording together and use the following prompts to reflect on the experience of grief as it impacts the celebration of Jewish holidays, and how they can engage grandchildren in meaningful opportunities to turn memories of the dead into blessings for the living.

Key Takeaways

- **Talking about grief is essential.** Normalizing the experience of grief is vital in teaching grandchildren that it is healthy to miss someone or have other big feelings about a loved one who has died. Telling stories of the deceased can help bring their memory to life even for children who were born after they died.
- **Memories are for blessings.** It is traditional to say, "may their memory be for a blessing" after someone has died. Enacting this wish in reality can take many forms, such as recalling family traditions or recipes, using ritual or other inherited objects as part of family activities, and talking about these traditions and objects regularly at family gatherings and holiday celebrations. In this way, we may infuse the experiences with warm memories of the deceased and be inspired to live by their values.
- **Death is a part of life.** Your family is not the only family experiencing the feelings of loss after the death of a loved one. Helping children to see their experience as one

that is shared by all of humanity, and felt most acutely by their immediate family and friends, can help them to understand the cycle of life — that everything alive will eventually die, and new people and creatures will be born.

Tips for Talking About Grief with Grandchildren

- **Share pictures of earlier generations.** Looking at photographs or videos together creates an invitation to talk about people who appear in pictures but are no longer alive. You may choose to display pictures in your home, to share on screen when connecting online, or even to give copies of photographs to younger generations.
- **Talk about names.** What were the names the people in the pictures were called? Was Grandpa Jack also known as Jacob? Who in the next generation is named after someone from an earlier generation? In Ashkenazi families (from Eastern European roots), it is customary to name babies after someone who recently died. In Sephardic families (from Middle Eastern or Spanish roots), it is customary to name babies after a beloved older relative who is still alive.
- **Celebrate family traditions.** What holiday traditions observed in your family today were also celebrated in earlier generations? Perhaps there's a special family tune for a song or prayer or a recipe handed down over several generations.
- **Use cherished ritual or other physical objects.** Do you use Grandma's candlesticks or Grandpa's tallit (prayer shawl)? Are you wearing a necklace you received as a gift from a relative who is no longer alive? Talk about the objects in your home, your family, and your life that are connected to earlier generations.

Discussion Questions

1. **Grief:** How and when do you anticipate experiencing grief? What would support you in bringing your deceased loved one's memory into your current family gatherings?
2. **Photos:** How are you utilizing photos to pass along traditions to the next generation? What could you create to support this effort? Will your grandchildren inherit physical photo albums or photo books?
3. **Names:** Who were you or your grandchildren named after and how did your parents and grandparents honor their loved ones through traditions? What of these could you pass along?
4. **Ethical will:** What are some of the values that a deceased loved one lived by? How did they demonstrate their commitment to this value during their lifetime? How might we carry on their values through our own actions?
5. **Memories for blessings:** What are the memories you count as blessings in your own life?