



## **What's Missing? Creating Jewish Blessings and Rituals as We Age**

Curricular Outline for two 60-minute virtual or in-person programs with older adults (60+).

*If you need help with additional content or guidance in personalizing this for your community, don't hesitate to reach out: Claire Solomon Nisen, LMSW, MPH, Manager, Lasting Impressions, DOROT – [cnisen@dorotusa.org](mailto:cnisen@dorotusa.org)*

### **Objective:**

In these workshops we will explore what we feel might be missing from Jewish tradition—blessing and ritual—around aging and end of life planning. We will explore “firsts” that we have experienced, both joy and sorrow, that we weren’t able to formally honor through Jewish tradition and have an opportunity to create our own individual blessing and/or ritual around those moments. We will also learn about Jewish resources that may help us as we continue to mark the passage of time. Please note, this program is open to participants of all faith or non-faith traditions and levels of knowledge and will also focus on Jewish ritual and blessing.

*Note:* This group can be small (5-10 people), or large (up to 50)—group activities can be tailored to the size of the community.



This resource was created as part of the Educator Fellowship, which was generously supported by The Covenant Foundation.



## Framework for Blessing Workshop

### 00:00 - 0:05:

1. **For the Facilitator:** Introduce yourself, your organization, and any existing Community Guidelines or Group Norms
  - a. *Note:* You can read the community guidelines / group norms that you typically use for your programs; if such guidelines do not exist, please feel free to reach out to me – [cnisen@dorotusa.org](mailto:cnisen@dorotusa.org) – or, to ask the group what norms and guidelines they would like to make sure exist for this community.
2. **Say:** We will begin by introducing ourselves by sharing our name, geographical place, and one word that we come with today for this workshop—what word are you thinking about that we would like to bring to this communal space.

### 0:05 – 0:15:

1. **Ask:** In your own words, what is a blessing?
  - a. *If on Zoom,* feel free to utilize the Zoom chat.
    - i. *If you need language to start folks off or transition:*
      1. What makes something a blessing? What are the components of a blessing?
2. **Say:** Rabbi Isiah Rothstein defines a blessing this way: “In the Torah, blessings are seen as a conduit for spiritual and physical potential. God blesses Adam and Eve to fill the world, Abraham is called a blessing for all his descendants.... The Talmud ([Ta’anit 8b](#)) teaches: ‘A blessing is found only in an object that is hidden from the eye,’ suggesting that the power of blessings are found in that which is not seen.” ([The Power of Jewish Blessings | My Jewish Learning](#))”
3. **Say:** Other rabbis see blessings as “...aspirational; we express in word and gesture our deepest yearnings. A blessing is an expression of hope.” ([What Is a Blessing? | Reform Judaism](#))
4. **Say:** Can anyone share an example of a blessing that is meaningful to you?
5. **Say:** A blessing that may be familiar to all of you is the blessing we say upon someone’s death – “*Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam,*

**Dayan HaEmet.**” *Blessed are you God, King of the Universe, the True Judge.* This is the first step in acknowledging a death—often recited at the start of a funeral.

6. **Say:** Does anyone have any more thoughts, or reflections, on blessings?

**0:15 – 0:19:**

1. **Say:** Now that we have a shared language around what a blessing is, and have identified blessings that have been meaningful to us, can you think of a time that you wanted to honor a moment with a blessing when a blessing wasn’t available or created?
2. **Say:** There are so many moments in Judaism that we mark, and that we bless – and also, so many moments that I know you have experienced that we don’t formally bless as we age – retirement, when we lose someone slowly or unexpectedly, when we drive for the last time, when we start or stop caretaking for a loved one, when we stop dyeing our hair, when we intentionally learn something new, or travel to a new place. I want us to take this time to create a blessing that we can keep in our pockets – and think about this as an opportunity to create our own blessings, and ways in which to mark time.
3. **Say:** I want to introduce you to two places that you may find meaning and inspiration- [Ritualwell - Tradition & Innovation](#), and [Recustom](#). Ritualwell is an online repository of original Jewish ritual (today is about blessings, our next program together is about ritual!) and ceremonies and blessings and prayer that mark “sacred moments.” Recustom is “platform designed to help people create, remix, and explore rituals from the Jewish tradition and beyond.” I’m going to share blessings found on Ritualwell and Recustom with you now to give you a sense of what these digital databases offer.

**0:19 – 0:27:**

1. **Say:** Any person - one of us! - can submit blessings and rituals to Ritualwell. Here is a blessing created by Rabbi Alex Weissman, called “Blessing for a Just Society.” ([Blessing for a Just Society - Ritualwell](#))
  - a. *Note: Ask if anyone in the group would like to read.*

*“Barukh sh’amar v’hayah ha’olam.*

Blessed is the One who spoke and the world came into being.

Blessed are the words of creation.

Blessed is the creation of a loving and just society.

Blessed is the society that honors human dignity.

Blessed are those who know the call of justice.

And let us say: *Amen.*”

2. **Say:** Here is a blessing from Recustom’s digital booklet called “[rituals for aging](#)”, which has other blessings and rituals particularly geared towards older adults. This blessing is written by Rabbi Adina Allen, of the Jewish Studio Project, for those who have embarked on a new hobby.
- a. *Note: Ask if anyone in the group would like to read.*

Blessed are You,  
Hashem Source of Life  
Who created us in Your image  
and invites us to renew daily, perpetually,  
the work of creation.  
Blessed are You, Hashem,  
Who created us creative.

*Note:* For the full text, and the Hebrew text: [ברכת יוצר יצירים | A Blessing for Creating, by Rabbi Adina Allen \(Jewish Studio Project\) • the Open Siddur Project](#) פרויקט הסדור הפתוח

3. **Say:** I wanted to share one last blessing before we embark on our own – it was created as a part of [What Matters](#), a signature program of [Shomer Collective](#) that “offers conversation, programming and resources, drawing on Jewish wisdom, relating to advance care planning, post-death arrangements and other end-of-life matters” ([What Matters](#)). DOROT is a What Matters site, so some of you may be familiar with What Matters. This blessing was written by a rabbi as a way to acknowledge the act of participating in a conversation around end-of-life decision making. It’s a perfect example of a moment that so many of us have, that we might want to bless, but for which no blessing exists.
- a. *Note: Ask if anyone in the group would like to read.*

G-d, I ask that you keep your Presence with me during this important conversation.  
Help bring to surface the values that are most important to me.  
Grant me clarity about my true wishes.  
Endow in me strength in voice. Guide me in my important decision-making.  
Enable me to work through any difficulties these conversations bring up,  
navigating the relationships of those around me.  
Comfort me if these conversations bring up pain.  
Be with me, G-d, along the way.  
Allow me to use this opportunity to bring blessing into my life  
and the lives of those I cherish most.  
Be a constant reminder that my life is sacred and infused  
with you, the Divine.

**00:27 – 00:45:**

1. **Say:** Some of you might have a blessing on the tip of your tongue or pen. Others might not know a place to start. We’ll start together, first, by spending 5 minutes writing about the moment that we’d like to mark. What is it? Is it one you have

experienced, or one you anticipate experiencing? What are its details—what does it look like, does it embody a particular place or time? After we have written down “where” we are—and positioned ourselves “in” our moments – we’ll then spend ten minutes creating our blessings.

- a. *Note: Set timer for 5 minutes.*
2. **Say:** Some of you may be ready to create your blessing right now! Others may still want to take more time framing this moment into a blessing. I want to provide one tool that may be useful for your blessing writing, called a “six word memoir.” How would you write your blessing – tell the story of this moment that you wish you had marked, or want to mark, as a part of your process of aging – in six words?
3. **Say:** Here are some examples from [Six-Word Memoirs – One Life, Six Words. What's Yours?](#)
  - b. “Aging: swimming in a sea of losses.”
  - c. “Stepping into the I can’t. Boldly.”
  - d. “Memories crisscross maplines. Searching for Home.”
4. **Say:** I’m going to give us the next ten minutes to think about the moment that we want to honor or hold in the form of a blessing. I invite you to write in a way that is most comfortable and moving for you – this six word memoir, a traditional blessing, a poem - whatever speaks most to you at this time. We’ll then have an opportunity to share our blessings with the group.
  - a. *Note: Set timer for 10 minutes.*

**00:45 – 00:55:**

1. **Say:** We have just about 10 minutes left together. I would love for you to share the blessings that you have created for moments that you want to hold and honor.
  - a. *Note: Give space and room for silence. If time allows, ask participants how this experience was for them.*

**00:55-00:60:**

1. **Say:** In our remaining time together, I would love to learn how this experience was for you. And, if we have additional time, you came to our group with one word that you brought to our space. I’d like you now to share the word you’re leaving with. From your word, I will [attempt] to create a communal blessing for us. Please if you feel so moved, share your word with us.
  - a. *Note: Jot down the words that you hear and work to quickly create a group blessing. It can be imperfect!*

*Thank the group for their participation.*



## Framework for Ritual Workshop

### 00:00 - 0:05:

1. **For the Facilitator:** Introduce yourself, your organization, and any existing Community Guidelines or Group Norms.

*Note:* You can read the community guidelines / group norms that you typically use for your programs; if such guidelines do not exist, please feel free to reach out to me – [cnisen@dorotusa.org](mailto:cnisen@dorotusa.org) – or, to quickly ask the group what norms and guidelines they would like to make sure exist for this community.

2. **Say:** We will begin by introducing ourselves by sharing our name, geographical place, and one word that we come with today for this workshop—what word are you thinking about that we would like to bring to this communal space.

### 0:05 – 0:25:

1. **Ask:** In your own words, what is a ritual?
  - a. *If on Zoom*, feel free to utilize the Zoom chat.
    - i. *If you need language to start folks off, or transition to ritual:*
      1. What makes something a ritual? What are the components of a ritual?
2. **Say:** Rabbi Shimon Felix notes that “rituals offer us the chance to live a heroic moment, fashioned out of what would otherwise be the dry stuff of history. It is through ritual that we can create existences and experiences not otherwise accessible to us.” ([The Role Of Ritual | My Jewish Learning](#))
3. **Say:** One way of interpreting this is that rituals give us the opportunity to make an ordinary moment extraordinary. What does that mean to you?
4. **Say:** What is the difference between a blessing and a ritual?
5. **Say:** Most commonly, blessings are words that suggest a type of protection, or sacredness or holiness. And rituals are actions that can be enacted on their own, or are a part of a ceremony. The blessings are what we say, the rituals are what we do. And, I imagine, we can also think about this in other ways—I invite you to mull this over.

6. **Say:** Can anyone share an example of a ritual that is meaningful to you?
7. **Say:** There are many, many rituals around death and dying that are likely familiar to you. I want to take this time to introduce you to a visual resource, BimBam, which is a platform that utilizes digital storytelling to teach Jewish tradition, ritual and custom to all ages. I invite us to view their Guide to Shiva practices and helping friends in mourning.
8. **Watch:** [Jewish Guide to Shiva Practices and Helping Your Friend in Mourning](#) (run time: 2:23)
9. **Say:** Does anyone have any thoughts, or reflections, on this animation? Or, did it bring up rituals related to end-of-life practice that are meaningful to you – or that you do not identify with - that you'd like to share?

**0:25 – 0:31**

1. **Say:** There are many Jewish rituals around death and mourning, and some around aging but – what about what might be missing? There are many moments that we experience that we do not mark, as we age, that we may wish we could ritualize—retirement, a sudden or gradual loss, when we move a family member into a new home, the last time we speak with a loved one, when we receive a clean bill of health, when we make a new friend. How can we deepen our meaning and connection to ritual, and tradition, and to our lived experiences, as we age?
2. **Say:** There are several organizations that aim to help us think about the role of ritual in our lives—we introduced these resources briefly in our previous workshop about blessings. If you didn't attend, do not fret! We will make sure you have that information if you'd like it.
  - a. Recustom ([Recustom](#)), —a “platform designed to help people create, remix, and explore rituals from the Jewish tradition and beyond”
  - b. Ritualwell ([Ritualwell - Tradition & Innovation](#))
3. **Say:** What are moments that have not been, or are not being marked for you?

**00:31 – 00:43**

1. **Say:** I invite us to spend the next ten minutes writing about the experience, or set of experiences, that you want to ritualize. What does it look like? Where is it? How might it make you feel? What is your past experience with it—tell us its story. After you tell the story of this moment, if you are able, begin to think about what a ritual might look like around it. Who, what, where, when, and how it might be created or performed? What's the action that you are taking? I am thinking of, “easier to access” rituals – like putting a stone on a grave, placing a

mezuzah on a doorpost, closing our eyes when we say the *shema*. What can you “do” that accompanies the story that you have just written down?

a. *Note: Set a timer for 10 minutes*

**00:43 – 00:53**

1. **Say:** We have just about 10 minutes left together. I know this just scratches the surface. I would love for those who are moved to share what you have written –so that we can learn more about the moments that you want to hold and honor, and, if you have had time to think about it, how – the act – you envision honoring them.

a. *Note: Give space and room for silence. If time allows, ask participants how this experience was for them.*

**0:53-0:60**

1. **Say:** In our remaining time together, I want to ritualize this opportunity that we have created together. We began with one word that we brought to our space. I would like you – if you are able – to share one word that you’re leaving with. *And* to share how you would “act” on that word – how are you feeling, right now, and what does that feeling look like? I’ll give an example “Gratitude” – and I’m placing my hand over my heart, as an act of thanks. After we have shared our words and actions, I will put them all together – an [attempt] to create a communal ritual for this particular experience. I understand that this isn’t quite a ritual – but it marks this moment for us. And, that’s a place to start.

a. *Note: Jot down the words and actions and work to quickly create a group ritual. It can be imperfect!*

*Thank the group for their participation.*



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