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Facilitator Outline for Interfaith Couples Discussion on End of Life

This is a brief outline to help you plan a discussion on end of life issues for interfaith couples. This outline relies upon a clergy person or educator's knowledge of Jewish end of life issues and Jewish values, as well as strong pastoral skills. If you need help with additional content or guidance in personalizing this for your particular setting, please contact me at mmersack@jecc.org. --Rabbi Melinda Mersack, Director of jHUB.

Objectives:

For interfaith couples to:

1. Engage in conversation on end of life topics unique to their being in an interfaith relationship.
2. Explore Jewish themes and customs related to end of life.
3. Engage in conversation to empower them to make practical, personal end of life decisions that honor their individual needs.

Framework: may be used as part of premarital counseling or meeting with one couple, or a session in a workshop series or gathering for a group of 6-10 interfaith couples.

Facilitator: a rabbi, cantor or educator with pastoral skills (possibly accompanied by a social worker, if part of a workshop series)

Timeline (for a workshop session or conversation with multiple couples):

0:00-0:15 Introductions

0:15-0:20 Establish group norms and conversation guidelines

0:20-0:30 Text study

0:30-1:00 Group discussion

1:00-1:20 Couple discussions

1:20-1:25 Report out

1:25-1:30 Wrap up and next steps

Activities:

0:00-0:15 Introductions

Group leader sets the tone and explains the importance of this discussion. Ideally this is occurring towards the beginning of the couples' committed relationship. Give each couple an opportunity to introduce themselves and invite them to share why they are interested in this

conversation and any specific questions or topics they'd like to discuss. Take note of issues raised and attempt to address them throughout the session.

0:15-0:20 Establish group norms and conversation guidelines

Create a safe space where individuals feel comfortable expressing their beliefs and concerns. To that end, discuss guidelines for your time together. Ask the group what practices will best help facilitate this conversation. What do they personally need to feel comfortable sharing in the group setting? What do they need from others in the group? Write down what is shared and post it before the group as a reminder. Some suggestions are listening without judgment or critique, leaving space for others, speaking personally and not for others, asking clarifying questions. Listen for values expressed by participants and take the opportunity to share relevant wisdom from Jewish teachings pertaining to what they expressed (e.g. the *middah* humility, not judging others from Pirke Avot 2:4, etc.).

0:20-0:30 Text study

Choose a Jewish text to explore with the group to frame the conversation through a Jewish lens. Some suggested texts are Genesis 25:8, Pirkei Avot 5:21, Pirkei Avot 2:4, or Shabbat 153a. Use the text as a jumping off point to help the group feel comfortable talking and to share relevant Jewish themes (e.g. value on life, Jewish views of the afterlife, the body is on loan from God, the body as a temple, etc.) to set the stage for the group discussion. Ask what they learn from the text about Judaism's approach to life? How do Jewish values inform Jewish funeral and burial practices?

0:30-1:00 Group discussion

This is an opportunity to share Jewish customs and traditions and respond to any questions. The couple discussions that follow are an opportunity for each couple to begin to discuss their personal feelings and wishes with each other.

Share **Jewish funeral and burial practices**. Make note that Jewish cemeteries have different rules about whether they allow partners of other faiths to be buried there, allow clergy of other faiths to participate or officiate at the grave, allow symbols of other faiths on headstones, or allow other faith or cultural practices at graveside. Find out what your local Jewish cemeteries allow so you can share this information with your interfaith couples.

Discuss **Jewish mourning rituals**. Explain the different options for when the deceased is not Jewish but there are Jewish mourners, and when the deceased is Jewish but the mourners are not. After speaking generally about what may be permissible, encourage those couples affiliated with synagogues to speak to their rabbi since each rabbi may have their own practices.

Discuss **guardianship of children**. If a couple has or plans to have children, they should determine who they wish to name legal guardian in the event that they die before the child becomes an adult. In addition to the common considerations about who is a trustworthy, safe, responsible and financially sound adult, interfaith couples should consider who will honor their wishes and is capable of raising their children with the same interfaith or multicultural choices they choose.

Other possible topics for discussion include *vidui*/last rites, Jewish burial for someone with tattoos (a common misconception), medical ethics (e.g. organ donation, hospice care, cremation, etc.).

See [Shomer Collective](#) for more resources on Jewish practices.

1:00-1:20 Couple discussions

Invite each couple to turn to their partner and share their personal wishes for end of life. You may wish to give prompts such as: Which of these practices or customs is important to you? Discuss who you wish to assign guardianship, if you have children. Do you have any special wishes for your funeral, burial, or if you should need hospice care? Encourage couples to be respectful of their partner's wishes and to ask clarifying questions. It is important for couples to understand not only what their partner desires but also why. The facilitator may announce the halfway mark of this section to ensure that both partners have an opportunity to share. This is only the beginning of a conversation. Encourage couples to continue their discussions at home.

1:20-1:25 Report out

Circle back into one large group. Invite couples to share highlights from their conversation, or questions and topics they are still struggling with. This is an opportunity for couples to connect with and learn from other couples.

1:25-1:30 Wrap up and next steps

You may wish to conclude with a new Jewish text, or refer back to the introductory text to wrap up. Share next steps including encouragement for couples to continue their conversations at home with each other, seek legal counsel to create documents for each partner of the couple to ensure their wishes are met at end of life, and an invitation to connect with the facilitator as a further resource.

Additional Notes and Resources

This conversation is only the beginning. The ultimate goal is to encourage conversation between each couple and give them enough knowledge to make these decisions for themselves. Follow up with couples. If meeting as a group, ask the couples if they'd like to

reconvene to continue the conversation together or if they would like to share their contact information with each other to connect on their own. Provide additional resources, such as [Shomer Collective](#), Simcha Paull Raphael's [Jewish Views of the Afterlife](#) and Anita Diamant's [Saying Kaddish](#) to further support couples learning about Jewish customs, beliefs and traditions.



For more Jewish wisdom and resources on death and dying, visit www.shomercollective.org.