

While talking about death can be taboo in general, talking about death with children has a double taboo as adults seek to shield children, or are unsure of how to talk about death with kids in a developmentally appropriate way. Children, with their innate curiosity, may have many questions about death related topics, yet their questions might be brushed off by well-meaning, though perhaps ill-equipped adults. This can send children the overt or subtle message that talking about death is not acceptable, which can lead to children coming to their own misguided conclusions. This resource aims to equip educators with guidance on how to facilitate a deliberate conversation with students related to death, and enriched by the wisdom of Jewish teachings.

In this format, Death Over Dinner is adapted for children in the following ways:

- Name of Program- I chose to call my program, “Live, Laugh, Lunch”, but other names that make sense for your program can be used.
- Length (shorter than adult program, about 30-45 minutes)
- During the school day, during students’ regular lunch period
- Small group, with known peers (as opposed to the adult version which can be done with strangers)
- Elective (students sign up, not mandatory)
- Led by familiar staff members, preferably someone who specializes in Judaic studies and one who specializes in child development
- Developmentally appropriate prompts for upper elementary students and older
- Program followed by usual recess time, providing students a healthy outlet to decompress before continuing their school day.

**Example of Timing Breakdown:**

<b>Minutes</b>	<b>Activity</b>
0- 5	Students arrive with their lunch, start eating, talk freely for 5 minutes
5-10	Introduction of expectations (Take turns, Share the mic, Speak about your own experiences, You do not have to respond to every question, Listen openly and respectfully, Questions or anything to add from students)

10-12	Reading and Selection of Prompt
13-28	Discussion of Prompt, while taking turns (Additional prompts on hand in case program runs quickly)
28-30	Processing and wrap up
30	Transition to recess or next activity. If possible, one adult can be available for additional processing with individual student if necessary.

**Suggested Prompts:**

In the Judaics classroom, death is a topic that comes up directly and indirectly through holiday stories, Torah stories, and topics of Jewish history. When thinking about prompts for children related to death, I thought about topics that were already familiar to them, as well as introducing them to ritual which might be unfamiliar, but would have a practical use in becoming literate members of a Jewish community.

In the adult “Death over Dinner” the facilitator chooses the prompt. In this child-friendly version, students can volunteer to pick a prompt based on its name, to give them agency.

**Topics to choose from:**

1 Pesach Story and Seder	2 Sitting Shiva	3 Visiting a Grave	4 Ancestors who Died	5 Joseph and Hannah Senesh
--------------------------------	--------------------	-----------------------	----------------------------	----------------------------------

**1. Pesach Story and Seder**

In the Pesach story we learn that during the 10th plague, all first born people and animals were killed. During the seder, we remove a drop of wine while reciting the names of each of the ten plagues. Many people say that this symbolizes not drinking with a full cup, while others are suffering and dying.

- Why would it be important for the rabbis to remind us not to rejoice over other people's suffering or death? Is this not obvious?

## 2. Sitting Shiva

The word "*shiva*" comes from the Hebrew word for seven. The Torah tells us at the end of Sefer Breisheet that Yosef mourned Ya'akov, (his father), for seven days after he died.

In Judaism there is a custom for adults (b'nei mitzvah and older) to "sit shiva" for a week after a close family member dies (parent, sibling, child, spouse).

- Has anyone here ever been at a shiva? What was it like?

(If there is a student in the group who knows about shiva, they can explain. If there is not, students can view this video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkKqoUYoXTg&t=138s>

The person or people sitting shiva stay home, and people visit them.

- Can you imagine how this custom could be comforting for the mourner/s?
- Can you imagine how this custom might be challenging for the mourner/s?

## 3. Visiting a Grave

There is a Jewish custom to place a rock on the headstone when visiting a grave. This lets other people know that the grave was recently visited by someone.

- Have you ever visited a grave before? What was it like?  
Who were you with? Did you place a rock?
- Can you think of another reason that we put a rock on a grave? (As opposed to leaving flowers, a different object, or nothing at all).

What else can a rock symbolize?

End with this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCf73v0LvCk&t=58s>

#### **4. Ancestors who Died**

“Yizkor” means remember. It is also the name of a prayer that people say four times a year (Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Pesach, Shavuot) to remember those who have died. Remembering those who have died, and sharing memories of them, is a way that we pass on family history and values.

- Is there someone in your family that you know about who died before you were born?
- What do you know about them?
- How did you learn about them if you never met them?
- What lessons or values have you learned from this ancestor?

#### **5. Joseph and Hannah Senesh**

Before Joseph dies at the end of Sefer Breisheet, he asks Bnei Yisrael to promise to bring his bones out of Egypt and back to Canaan, when they are eventually taken out of Egypt by God.

- Why do you think it was important to Joseph to plan for where his remains would be after he was dead? This must have been very important to him, if he was asking newly freed people to carry his remains through the desert.
- If students are familiar with the story of Hannah Senesh, her story can also be used. Hannah Senesh’s remains were brought from Hungary to a young Israel in 1950. Why do you think it was important to the new State of Israel to go through the effort to do this, only a few years after its founding? Didn’t they have enough important tasks to take care of at that time?