



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

How to Organize a Panel Discussion about End-of-Life Planning for Parents of Young Children

By Mara Bragg

This educator resource explains how to organize a family program (for adults) about end-of-life planning documents. The program goal for participants is to learn about (and later complete) necessary legal and healthcare paperwork based on their values and preferences and as guided by Jewish wisdom. These guidelines were developed during the Shomer Collective Educator Fellowship, 5784 cohort, and provided the basis for the pilot program “Getting Your House in Order: Planning for the What-Ifs While Living Your Best Life” at the Marlene Meyerson JCC Manhattan in New York City on June 20, 2024. This program can be adapted for a mix of program settings, from preschools to Hebrew schools and JCCs or any cohort of parents, and tailored to a range of formats, from a single session to a workshop series, to meet individual needs.

Normalizing End-of-Life Conversations

Programs about end-of-life planning aren't often designed for parents with young children, whether out of fear of talking about death, superstitions, or perceived lack of relevance or interest to this demographic. Unfortunately, it sometimes takes an unexpected loss in a community to underscore the need to holistically and proactively support families with a full range of life cycle resources. Hopefully families won't have a use for their end-of-life documents for decades, but completing them now could preemptively reduce potential future stress and chaos in the unforeseen event of an emergency. Offering a program tailored for this “unlikely” demographic helps normalize the process of talking about death, for all ages and stages in life.

Using a Values-Based Approach

Despite the importance of planning ahead, talking about death can be daunting. A values-based framework, drawing on personal preferences and Jewish wisdom and tradition, can gently guide people into conversations about end-of-life and set a foundation for an easier decision-making process. Additionally, when parents articulate the values that matter most to them, the benefits of knowing this are applicable right now for everyday life, and not solely as a future contingency, should guardians need to

carry forward these values for children. When families can better define who they are, and what they want their life and legacy to look like in the future, they are focusing on the many positive and life-affirming aspects of today, versus overwhelming or scary fears about hypothetical “what-ifs” in the future. This process can be a roadmap to living life fully in the here and now, long before end-of-life concerns are more timely.

Determining Project Scope

We chose to offer an overview of end-of-life planning documents, including legal and healthcare aspects, to introduce parents to these topics while encouraging them to continue the process with thoughtful consideration of their wishes and completion of documents. The time frame (75 minutes) was selected as a bite-size piece for busy parents on a weeknight. There are many ways to expand this offering, with a longer workshop in greater depth or as a series of sessions. Stand-alone sessions could include: a deeper focus on clarifying family values, Jewish customs and traditions around end-of-life, legal and healthcare decision-making in separate sessions, considerations of guardianship and raising children with Jewish values, creating an ethical will, funeral and burial considerations, organ donation, etc.

Selecting a Framing Lens

Considering a range of approaches may help guide your content planning, messaging and promotion of the event. Potential angles could include:

- Planning for the worst while living your best life.
- It’s about the conversation *before* anything happens. Pre-planning can help avert potential family crises later.
- It’s a gift you give your children. Just as you want to pick the best nursery school for your children, you can work to ensure the best future for your loved ones in the unforeseen event that you are not present in their lives.
- Sandwich generation: parents of young children might have an easier time attending a program like this if considering these planning documents for *their* parents (but at the same time also take it in for themselves)
- Address the elephant in the room of why this is difficult to do. Could also address Jewish superstition and include Jewish texts to show the importance of planning ahead and specifying individual wishes.

Logistical and Planning Considerations

Panelists: Look within your own community and local circles first for a rabbi, lawyer and/or healthcare expert, to encourage participation through a shared sense of connection. Inviting a senior member of your organization (CEO, founding rabbi, etc) can also underscore the importance of the topic to families. Our speakers included a rabbi/chaplain from our organization, a staff member from the Shomer Collective What Matters program, and a lawyer who had previously presented in tandem with What

Matters. We also invited a community liaison for LiveOnNY to attend the program, provide brochures about organ donation from a Jewish perspective, and be available for questions afterwards. A Jewish funeral home director might also be included in a panel of speakers, depending on program length and needs of your community.

Audience: We chose to market the program to “parents with children of all ages,” to be more inclusive, while focusing internal outreach to families with pre-nursery and nursery school students. We also advertised in the community at large, and attracted at least one older adult without any children who was drawn in by the topic.

Timing: Consider the best time of year, in relation to parent bandwidth and likelihood to attend an event like this, as well as connections to the Jewish calendar, or any related events at your organization. Also consider the pros/cons of in-person versus Zoom, and how each might increase/decrease participation. If in person, a parallel program for children (or childcare) could be offered while parents attend the adults-only program. If online, it could be scheduled after bedtime for children.

Marketing Materials: Tailor the language and images on print fliers and social media to your community. Make sure all wording is accessible and inviting, while also being clear about the specific program content. Participants should know in advance what to expect, and why it’s important to attend, making a “scary” topic feel less threatening.

We ended up using different wording on different materials, also in relation to available space for text. For our social media graphic (also printed and posted in physical locations) it read: “Getting Your House in Order: Estate and Healthcare Planning” and the image showed a couple filling out documents at a table. For our website, the event listing read: “Getting Your House in Order: Living Your Best Life While Planning for the What Ifs” and was followed by a lengthier description (see below for full text).

Promotion: In addition to organizing your program content and speakers, pre-planning promotion of the event is equally important to encourage family buy-in and attendance. Make an early plan for how and when to advertise your program, both formally through your organization’s channels and by unofficially spreading the word, especially if the program is open to the public. Think across a continuum of internal programs to determine your target demographic and how best to reach them, whether through existing or new communications. Underscore the importance of the program and the extra need to promote what might be seen as a tough sell. Consider a “whisper campaign” among parents to invite friends to attend, and further normalize learning and conversations about end-of-life. Consider posting fliers beyond your organization on bulletin boards in coffee shops and playgrounds, or asking a few involved parents to post fliers in relevant places such as pediatrician offices or even in apartment buildings. Share the event listing with any local children/family publications and online parent

groups and related social media sites.

Program Timing and Content

Timing for 90-minute Event	Program Content
5 minutes	Participant arrival, literature on welcome table, optional ice breaker activity while waiting for event to start
3 minutes	Brief welcome from host, set intention and goals for the time together, any housekeeping notes, introduce rabbi for framing remarks
10 minutes	Rabbi's framing remarks, to anchor program within a Jewish context, make topic seem relevant and important to audience, address common fears about discussing death (superstitions, etc), or otherwise tailored to fit your demographic's needs
2 minutes	Host introduces panelists, explains flow of evening
25 minutes	Panelist 1, to present on legal aspects
20 minutes	Panelist 2, to present on healthcare aspects
10 minutes	Q & A with participants and panelists
Time check at 75 minutes	Advertised end of program, participants might linger or leave
15 minutes	Optional ongoing conversations, questions, taking brochures, wrapping up
Time check at 90 minutes	Final close of program

Interactive Activities to Increase Family Engagement

Activity for arrival: While waiting for the program to begin, participants can move about the room and add sticky notes to chart paper on the wall, in answer to two questions: "How are you living your best life now/this summer/etc?" and "What worries you about the what-ifs?" This exercise can help attendees ease into the evening's topic, and balance the "best life" versus "what-ifs" framework. The answers could be

referenced during the host's welcome, or not. As another idea, participants could scan a QR code upon arrival and anonymously answer the same questions. The host could reference some of the worries of the group during welcoming remarks, to normalize concerns of attending a program like this, and give positive encouragement for taking an important step forward.

Activity for departure: To extend an (optional) offer for gentle accountability, participants could choose to sign up to receive an email (from the host organization) at their interval of choice (1 month, 3 months, etc) checking in to see if they have moved forward with completing their documents, or if they need additional resources to do so. As another idea, "accountability buddies" could be paired up between attendees for mutual support and encouragement for the task at hand, and to more generally foster relationship-building within your parent community.

Website Listing Example

GETTING YOUR HOUSE IN ORDER: LIVING YOUR BEST LIFE WHILE PLANNING FOR THE "WHAT IFS"

06:00 PM - 07:15 PM

\$10.00 members \$10.00 public *[Note: charging a nominal fee may help parents feel more invested in attending the event. Offering a fee waiver, below, keeps it accessible to all.]*

In Person. Find guidance, resources and Jewish wisdom for families with children of all ages to "get their house in order" with important end-of-life documents. Expert panelists will share what you need to know about legal and healthcare decisions and paperwork that are key to complete no matter your age or stage of life. Considered through a values framework, making these informed and personalized decisions will allow you to live the kind of family life you want to enjoy with your loved ones, offering reassurance today and into the future. Hosted in partnership with the Shomer Collective Educator Fellowship, which was generously supported by the Covenant Foundation.

Look forward to hearing from these speakers:

Introductory remarks from Rabbi Yael Rapport, Director, The Gottesman Center for Jewish Living and The Selma and Lawrence Ruben Center for 20s + 30s at the Marlene Meyerson JCC Manhattan

Panelist Sally Kaplan is the Director of What Matters: Caring Conversations About End of Life, a Shomer Collective signature program, to elevate advance care planning in the Jewish community of New York and across the country. She is currently a member of the Advisory Committee of the Center for Pastoral Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary and has been a featured speaker for healthcare, congregational, and Jewish

communal audiences.

Panelist Jonathan Herlands, Esq. is the Partner In Charge of the Trusts and Estates Department at Gordon, Herlands & Randolph LLP, a midtown Manhattan law firm. He has been elected annually to Super Lawyers since the designation's inception twenty years ago.

This is an adults-only event, intended for parents of children of all ages.
For more information, or if the registration fee is a barrier to entry, please contact [email].

Social Media Graphic

marlene meyersson jcc manhattan

Getting Your House in Order: Estate + Healthcare Planning

With Guest Speakers Rabbi Yael Rapport,
Sally Kaplan, and Jonathan Herlands, Esq.



THU, JUN 20, 6PM

Presented by
Educator Fellowship

Resources for Additional Information

–**Shomer Collective**, “Inspiring end-of-life conversations and experiences, guided by Jewish values” <https://www.shomercollective.org>

–**What Matters:** Caring Conversations About End of Life, including these documents: Health Care Agent Information Card, Wallet Card, What If I Think I Have No One to Appoint as My Healthcare Agent?, Advance Care Planning as a Jewish Process, Fillable Living Will, Completing Your State’s Advance Directive Form: Important Things to Know, Find Your State’s Advance Directives, Additional Considerations: Funeral, Burial, Mourning and Legacy (Note: the above documents may be available by request, versus publicly available on the website)
<https://www.shomercollective.org/whatmatters>)

–**LiveOnNY** (the OPO, organ procurement organization, serving New York), brochures titled Organ Donation: A Jewish Perspective, plus three additional brochures titled Organ Donation: A Reform Judaism Perspective, A Conservative Jewish Perspective, and An Orthodox Jewish Perspective
<https://www.liveonny.org/judaism/#:~:text=Organ%2C%20Eye%2C%20and%20Tissue%20Donation,other%20religious%20act%20or%20consideration.>

–**Ematai**, information on healthcare choices from a Jewish perspective
<https://www.ematai.org>



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