



DEATH OVER [SHABBAT] DINNER

THE TOOLKIT



THE WAY WE DIE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT CONVERSATION AMERICANS ARE NOT HAVING. TALKING ABOUT DEATH IS NOT EASY AND WE'RE NOT USED TO IT, BUT WE BELIEVE THAT THIS CONVERSATION ULTIMATELY HELPS US APPRECIATE THE FULLNESS OF LIFE.



INTRODUCTION

Why talk about death over Shabbat dinner? In Judaism, talking about death is welcome. Death is neither macabre nor morbid, it is simply the natural end to a natural process. By the medieval period, Jewish theologians had sketched an approximate to heaven called *olam ha'ba*, or "the World to Come," a messianic age without pain, suffering, poverty, or strife. Shabbat became the link, a weekly version of the world to come, one day of peace, of gathering, of joy without distraction or work. In other words, Shabbat is a weekly taste of heaven. The Shabbat dinner table is therefore an ideal place for conversations about death, an invitation to use the end of the creation cycle and the end of the week as a setting to embrace the end of life.

CREATING RITUAL

The three Shabbat rituals of **lighting candles**, **sanctifying the evening with wine** and **blessing the bread** provide key moments to mindfully set-up the Death over Dinner conversation. Ritual, especially ritual at the Shabbat dinner table, should feel modifiable; as the host of your own Death over Shabbat Dinner, we invite you to change things up and only do what feels right.

- Lighting the candles on Friday night provides the space for setting intention before the start of the meal. In Jewish tradition, lighting candles at sundown on Friday is the last act of the workweek, the literal spark that carries us into the weekend.
- Sanctifying the evening with wine is an opportunity to make a toast, a perfect way to highlight a memory or person as you begin. In Hebrew a toast is accompanied by the word *l'chaim*, to life. Kiddush is a way of celebrating life even as you reflect on death.
- Blessing the Bread connects us to the process of work that has to happen in order for the challah to get to our table. The possibility and the abundance of Shabbat comes with the responsibility to work to make a better world the other six days of the week.



HOW IT WORKS

Apply to host with OneTable; once you're an approved host, post your own Death over [Shabbat] Dinner! Write a description that gives your guests a sense of what to expect and share your intentions for the dinner so that they feel prepared to join the conversation. Once your dinner is posted, send out your invitations through the platform and we'll pop into your inbox with a deck of cards specially crafted to help you facilitate the conversation at your dinner table. All dinners with 'Death over [Shabbat] Dinner' in the title will receive the deck by email, so get in touch if you've titled your dinner differently and want access to the deck, or with any questions.

1. Create Intentional Space

Here is a list of items we have found to be useful to help create a trusting, sacred space.

- Flowers
- Memorial candle
- Tea lights
 - Candles for each person to light at the beginning of the night
 - *Possible substitution:* stones instead of candles.
 - a) Everyone has a stone to place in the center in memory of someone.
 - b) You begin with stones in the center, everyone takes one when speaking
 - c) Everyone has a stone and places it in the center when they are want to cross their edge and be more vulnerable.
 - d) You can also have people write the name of someone they are memorializing or an intention they want to set on the stones.
- Matches
- Table seating cards if you'd like to assign seats
 - There are pros and cons to assigning seats. When hosting an intimate dinner, assigning seats can help in giving the dinner an elevated feel, giving guests a sense that the dinner experience was carefully crafted with each guest individually in mind. Arriving to a table with seating cards can also feel constrictive and too structured for some guests - especially if they're not expected. We encourage you to give this some thought and experiment with what feels best.
- You can begin and/or end with a *niggun* (wordless melody, or a song with no lyrics), poem, an intention on gratitude
- Offer an additional space where individuals can go to should they need a break/alone time during the dinner.

2. Facilitate Conversation

- Tables of 6-8 people make for the most meaningful conversation
- Encourage guests to speak in the first person, using “I” language from personal experience, and model this yourself
- Be mindful of the intention behind your speech. Are you speaking to be helpful and supportive? Are you speaking to hear yourself speak, impress others, or impose your own views /experiences on others?
- Practice active listening. Everyone brings their own wisdom and life experience to the table; we need everyone’s wisdom to move towards a hidden wholeness that is greater than the sum of its parts.
- Everyone is entitled to time in and time out. If someone wishes to step out, respectfully allow them that time.
- Maintain confidentiality.

3. Welcome Vulnerability

You might be one of those people more willing than others to have this conversation. Hopefully this will give you the space to bring them in.

- Be sure to let your guests know ahead of time that you plan on talking about death over Shabbat dinner.
- Everyone is already having this conversation in their head. What kind of invitation can you give them so they can start to have it with you or with others?
- This conversation is fueled by vulnerability. You have an edge. Everyone does.
- The way this conversation works best is that you don’t don’t sit on the edge, but take a moment to step over it.
- This is not a great place for phones.

4. Consider Shabbat Ritual

Using the framing provided below, consider how the ritual that you incorporate at your dinner table will prepare your guests for the conversation ahead. For more ritual guidance, take a look at [OneTable’s Shabbat Dinner Guide](#) and other parts of the [Resource Library](#).



USING THE CARDS

1. Start with the “Create Space” card and end with the “Gratitude” card, and feel free to switch up the order for the rest.
2. Each card has a theme and context on one side and questions to help prompt a meaningful conversation on the other.
3. Have someone at the table read the text on the first side aloud. Then pick some questions on the reverse to discuss.
4. From there, pick two to four prompts that suit your guests and craft the content you want.
5. Allow yourselves at least 1.5-2 hours for the conversation.
6. Following your last “Gratitude” card, close out the meal with an iteration of Jewish ritual: grace after the meal.





PRO TIPS

- Be sure to let your guests know ahead of time that you plan on talking about death over Shabbat dinner.
- There's a lot of material here. Review the cards before your guests arrive, and select prompts that resonate the most with you and the kind of discussions you'd like to create. Consider your guests, who they are, what they're coming with, and how you may best set up your conversation to resonate with their experiences.
- Consider framing certain prompts with parameters that might add depth or levity, depending on the question. For example, "answer this question in one word," or "act out your response to this question."
- Push but don't shove. Not everyone has to answer every question or participate in every part of the conversation.
- Take turns. Pass around the cards and allow your guests to choose a prompt to lead.
- Remember dessert. No one wants to be trapped at the dinner table forever. Be conscious of your guests' energy and be sure to conclude with a taste of something sweet and perhaps a *l'chaim*, a toast to life!



ENDING WITH GRATITUDE

Many faiths and cultures have a grace before meals, not quite as many have a grace after meals. The blessing after the meal, or *Birkat ha'Mazon* in Hebrew, like all Shabbat dinner rituals, evolved over time and comes from a verse in the Torah: "When you have eaten and are satisfied, bless."

The ritual of grace after meals isn't about expressing gratitude for food itself, but for food and a full feeling. All you need is the intention to end your Shabbat Dinner with gratitude and a feeling of fullness and satisfaction from the meal and important conversation you are stepping away from.

Shabbat dinner doesn't end when the food runs out. Shabbat dinner doesn't even end with grace, or a moment of gratitude after the meal. Shabbat dinner ends when you walk your guests to the door. It's a last act of ritual hospitality and one that makes hosting on Shabbat so deeply rooted in Jewish practice.

Shabbat Shalom.

Dani Kohanzadeh | OneTable LA Field Manager | dani@onetable.org
Madelyne Heyman | Reboot LA Program Coordinator | madelyne@rebooters.net