

Talking About Terminal Illness, Aging, Death in a Jewish Context

Below is a bibliography of books about aging, terminal illness, grieving, Jewish mourning rituals, and death. There are books for younger and older children and for families. They are available through the Havurah Shalom library (for members) or the Shabbat School Resources. Please feel free to contact Deborah Eisenbach-Budner, Havurah Shalom Education Director, with any questions.

Much of this information was adapted from a website called *Books (and Videos) for Jewish Children and Teens*. "In the Havurah Library" means that Havurah Shalom members can check these books out from our library. "Shabbat School Resources" means you should ask Deborah Eisenbach-Budner for this book.

FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN

[*Where Do People Go When They Die?*](#) by Mindy Avra Portnoy and illustrated by Shelly Haas, published by Kar-Ben Publishing, Minneapolis, MN (In the Havurah Library)

In this touching narrative, young children ask, "Where do people go when they die?" Each child asks an adult that they trust—a father, a mother, a grandfather, an aunt, a teacher—and, although the answers they receive are all different, each reassuring answer leads back to the same simple truths. Includes an afterward and helpful suggestions for parents.

[*For Heaven's Sake*](#) by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso (In the Havurah Library)

Isaiah hears the expression, "for heaven's sake" often, and decides he wants to find out what and where heaven is, particularly since he has been told that his grandfather is there. After unsatisfactory answers from his father, uncle, sister, and the mail carrier, he asks his grandmother. Isaiah and his grandmother then spend the day looking for heaven in all the places that his grandfather frequented: the soup kitchen where he volunteered, the library, and choir practice. When the child does not see the intended connections, Grandma answers, "I think, Isaiah, we can get close to heaven and to God in a place in our hearts. I feel there is a part of Grandpa in all the places and people we visited today, and a little bit of heaven, too." Sasso's comforting words and Finney's large, vibrant paintings will draw in young listeners. An excellent, nonsectarian choice for exploring a difficult concept.

[*Remember That*](#) by Leslea Newman and illustrated by Karen Ritz, published by Clarion Books, New York. (Shabbat School Resources)

This affectionately written book recounts the story of Bubbe as she makes the progression from living alone to living with her daughter (and granddaughter) and then finally, to living in a nursing home. Along the way, she passes on to her grandchild the finer points of Jewish tradition and a lifetime of valuable lessons, like "always eat when you're hungry" and "spend a little and save a little and the rest give away to charity." There is a poignant lesson imbedded in

the story, as the granddaughter learns that while her grandmother may grow older and change, the love the two share is stronger than age.

[Grandma's Soup](#) by Nancy Karkowsky and illustrated by Shelly Haas, published by Kar-Ben Copies, Rockville, MD (In the Havurah Library)

A poignant presentation of mental problems associated with senility and Alzheimer's disease. Grandma, who has always made the best chicken soup for Shabbat, suddenly starts to use inappropriate spices. She forgets her grandchildren's names and is unable to remember that they have just visited. The grandchildren are told that she is sick; that this is a problem sometimes associated with getting old, and that she will probably not get better. They are also told that they will still visit and care for her; "that is what families are for—to share the good times and the bad times."

[Sharing Grandma's Gift](#) by Shelley Berlin Parrish and illustrated by Kristi Petosa-Sigel, published by Peanut Butter Publishing, Milwaukee, WI (In the Havurah Library)

"If my wedding quilt just hangs on the wall, what story will it have to tell?", Allie wondered. She had learned so much about her own family through the needlework that was passed down from generation to generation. Would Allie's quilt ever have a story to share? This compassionate book is the true story of Allie and her family's journey as they learn to cope with grandma's terminal illness. It is a heartfelt story of love, hope and family tradition. It just so happens that Allie's family is Jewish. *Grandma's Gift* is intergenerational and a wonderful tool for helping young children cope with dying and grief. Petosa-Sigel's art is delicately stunning!

[Papa's Latkes](#) by Michelle Edwards illustrated by Stacy Shuett, published by Candlewick Press, Cambridge, MA (In the Havurah Library)

For Selma and her little sister, Dora, this is their first Chanukah without Mama. When Papa comes home carrying a big bag of potatoes and all the ingredients for latkes, Selma is worried. Mama always made the Chanukah latkes. Could they make them without her? In Michelle Edwards's poignant story, illustrated with Stacey Schuett's warmly glowing artwork, Selma comes to realize that while Chanukah — and especially latkes — will never be the same without Mama, Selma can still celebrate, and will always remember. This heartfelt, bittersweet tale that will resonate with anyone who has ever faced an empty chair at the holiday table.

[The Ugly Menorah](#) by Marissa Moss, published by Sunburst, Canada (In the Havurah Library)

On the first Hanukkah since Rachel's grandpa died, Rachel is keeping her grandma company. "Where is your menorah, Grandma?" Rachel asks. When Grandma points to a plain wooden board with tin cylinders, Rachel can't help crying, "It's so ugly!" Then Rachel listens as Grandma tells the menorah's history, and Grandpa seems to fill the house again.

[Saying Goodbye to Grandpa](#) (in Havurah Library as ZEYDE) By Moshe Spero
[Saying Goodbye to Grandma](#) By Moshe Spero (In the Havurah Library)

These books explain to children the Jewish mourning practices. The introduction details the steps that parents can take to help their child through the bereavement process. In *Saying Goodbye to Grandpa* (formerly published as ZEYDE), a young boy loses his grandfather and learns about the Jewish burial and mourning practices in this poignant story. In *Saying Goodbye to Grandma*, a young girl receives the special Shabbat candelabra that was her grandmother's. A touching story of love and loss.

[Daddy's Chair](#) by Sandy Lanton and illustrated by Shelly Haas; published by Kar-Ben Copies, Inc, Rockville, MD (In the Havurah Library)

Lanton succeeds in presenting the concept of a parent's death in a manner that is sensitive, realistic, and appropriate for young children. Although he knows that his father has died of cancer, Michael, the younger of two boys, can't believe that his father won't sit in his special chair again to read stories and play checkers. General concepts necessary to the process of accepting death are explained such as the fact that "good guys die" and that dead means the person won't ever come back. In addition, more specific Jewish customs and traditions observed during the seven days of shiva are discussed. Realistic sepia-toned illustrations convey emotions appropriate to the text, capturing both the family unity and love, as well as the pervasive sense of sadness. A well-done book on a difficult subject.

[Pearl's Marigolds for Grandpa](#) by Jane Zalben , published by Simon and Schuster, New York, NY (Shabbat School Resources)

That irrepressible lamb Pearl is back, though her spirit is understandably dampened, in Zalben's thoughtful exploration of death and the grieving process. After her grandfather's passing, Pearl is downcast ("Who will read me stories for as long as I want? Who will send me marigold seeds this spring?"), but the tenderness of family and friends carries her through her sadness. And, in an uplifting ending that reinforces the continuity of life, Pearl plants marigolds just as she did with her grandfather and resolves to carry on his traditions with her own grandchildren ("I'll let them pick the red checkers, and win, and read stories way past their bedtimes. Just like Grandpa"). Zalben's compassionate tale never becomes saccharine, and her delicate, detailed watercolors (e.g., Pearl being comforted on her mother's lap, Pearl sitting wistfully in her Grandpa's favorite chair) unfold like a series of snapshots, creating a cozy counterpoint to the somber theme. Concluding with a brief explanation of burial and mourning customs of different faiths, the broader context makes this book a particularly welcome addition on the subject.

FOR OLDER CHILDREN

[\(Havurah\) A Candle for Grandpa: A Guide to the Jewish Funeral for Children and Parents](#) by David Techner and Judith Hirt-Manheimer and illustrated by Joel Uskowitz, published by UAHC Press, New York, NY (In the Havurah Library)

Jewish funeral practices are explained carefully and gently from the perspective of an 11-year-old boy on the first anniversary of his grandfather's death. No special knowledge is needed to understand this book—each step is thoroughly detailed. A glossary and notes to parents about handling death with children are included. Although Techner represents Orthodox Jewish practice, the book was published by the Reform movement and thus has a more universal appeal.

[*Dear Elijah*](#) by Miriam Bat-Ami, published by the Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, PA and Jerusalem (In the Havurah Library)

Rebecca, 12, is from an observant Jewish family. She is troubled because her father is in the cardiac intensive-care unit facing bypass surgery and will be unable to prepare for and celebrate Passover with the family. In an innovative twist to the narrative convention, she works out her anxieties by writing notes (and sometimes lengthy letters) to the prophet Elijah. From March 1-April 20, readers are privy to her anger (at herself, her father, and God), her fears, her desires, and her inability to pray or to be as good a Jew as her father would require; all are played out in her one-sided correspondence.

[*Saying Goodbye: A Handbook for Teens Dealing with Loss and Mourning*](#) by Neal C. Goldberg and Miriam Lieberman (In the Havurah Library)

Orthodox handbook explaining Jewish death customs and the wisdom behind them at a teen level.

[*The Remembering Box*](#) by Eth Clifford published by Beech Tree, New York (Shabbat School Resources)

Nine-year-old Joshua has visited his Grandma Goldina on the Sabbath since he was five. Joshua loves Roy Rogers and other heroes of his day (1942), but he especially loves these times with Grandma. Every week he picks something out of a big trunk this is Grandma's "remembering box" and each object reminds her of a story of her childhood. Joshua listens in rapt attention to her humorous tales of adventure that evoke "the old country." Then one night Grandma gives Joshua his own box, and in it are some of his favorites from her box. When Grandma does not open her eyes after her reverie, Joshua carries on the tradition of lighting the Sabbath candles before calling his father. Grandma has passed on more than her own memories; she has given him a sense of heritage of his people as well.

[*Lost and Found: A Kid's Book for Living Through Loss*](#) by Rabbi Marc Gellman and Monsignor Thomas Hartman

Familiar television faces and the authors of *How Do You Spell God?* (1995), Gellman, a rabbi, and Hartman, a Roman Catholic priest, explore issues of loss for elementary- and middle-school students, and for parents who want to discuss such concerns with their children. Using words like "stuffy" and "busting up," their informal text is aimed straight at kids and incorporates lots of examples children can relate to as well as relevant excerpts from such wide-ranging sources as A. A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh and Sarah Dessen's 1996 teen novel, *That Summer*. Careful not

to patronize or denigrate, they begin with discussion of “small” losses—a missing toy, a friend’s moving away—and proceed to losses of greater magnitude, such as divorce or the death of a loved one. With a few exceptions, such as a discussion of the soul, this is not a strictly religious book. Rather it is a practical, heartfelt exploration that emphasizes the idea of picking up after a loss and learning to look back with fondness and understanding. A list of further readings is appended.

[When a Grandparent Dies : A Kid’s Own Remembering Workbook for Dealing With Shiva and the Year Beyond](#)

The death of a grandparent is often a child’s first encounter with grief. Why did this happen? What should I do? How do I feel? This workbook helps children to participate in the process of mourning, and overcome the awkwardness that often accompanies their participation in grieving rituals. Drawing insights from both psychology and Jewish tradition, *When a Grandparent Dies* offers children guided exercises, rituals, and places to write, draw, list, create, and express their feelings. Appropriate for children aged 7-11, the workbook moves from the immediacy of shiva through the entire year of mourning. Children and parents who use this book together will have a unique opportunity for sharing as they come to know more about themselves, their family, and the complexities of life and death.

ADDITIONAL HELPFUL BOOKS WITHOUT JEWISH CONTENT

For Younger Children

[Waiting to Sing](#) by Howard Kaplan and illustrated by Herve Blondon, published by Dorling Kindersley Publishing, New York, NY (Shabbat School Resources)

[Someone Special Died](#) by Joan Singleton Prestine, published by Fearon Teacher Aids, Torrance, CA (Shabbat School Resources)

[What’s Happening to Grandpa](#) by Maria Shriver and illustrated by Sandra Speidel, published by Little Brown and Company and Warner Books, Boston and New York (Shabbat School Resources)

[My Grandma’s in a Nursing Home](#) by Judy Delton and Dorothy Tucker and illustrated by Charles Robinson, published by Albert Whitman and Company, Niles, Illinois (Shabbat School Resources)

For Older Children

[Tear Soup](#) by Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen, illustrated by Taylor Bills, Grief Watch, Portland, Oregon (In the Havurah Library)

For Parents

[A Tiny Boat at Sea: How to help children who have a parent diagnosed with cancer](#) by Izetta Smith, Grief Watch, Portland, Oregon (Shabbat School Resources)