

## Death Cafe as an Educational Tool for Jewish Communities

A Project Designed by Rena Boroditsky  
as part of the Gamliel Institute's  
Course 3: Educating, Organizing, and Training  
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**Tea. Cake. Death. Join the Conversation.**

### I. THE BIG IDEA

Our Chevra Kadisha offers educational sessions on Jewish the end of life rituals throughout the year in several Jewish venues such as local Synagogues, JCC, service groups, our Jewish day school, and Limmud.

While these sessions are important and successful, they are targeted to individuals who are already active or engaged in the community.

The Death Cafe model attracts people who may not be affiliated or who simply don't attend "Jewish" events. Death Cafe does not have speakers or set topics; the conversation is determined by the participants. This open format allows for a wide range of end of life topics to be explored from a general "human" starting point. In the course of the discussion, Jewish values and practises at the end of life may be offered or presented as options for individuals.

### WHAT IS DEATH CAFE?

The Death Cafe model was developed by Jon Underwood and Sue Barsky Reid, based on the ideas of Bernard Crettaz.

Death Cafe is a global "social franchise", meaning anyone can access the "how to" guide online, agree to abide by the founding principles, and host their own Death Cafe.

"Death Cafes have spread quickly across Europe, North America and Australasia. As of today, we have offered 1471 Death Cafes since September 2011. If 10 people came to each one that would be 14710 participants. We've established both that there are people who are keen to talk about death and that many are passionate enough to organise their own Death Cafe."

The Death Cafe concept is simple and straightforward. A relaxed gathering of people, some refreshments, and an opportunity or permission to talk about all things end of life. With no set agenda or speaker, the conversation is participant driven, and so each event is different. The traditional Death Cafe model is non denominational and non directive. The open format allows for a wide range of options including a faith based event, an age based event, or an LGBT event.

### II. THE A, B, C, D OF THE PROJECT

## AUDIENCE

- Primary audience is Jewish adults who wish to discuss and explore all end of life issues in a relaxed comfortable gathering
- Death Cafe is not a support group , not for newly bereaved individuals
- Secondary audience is the general community

## BEHAVIOR

Using the “How To Run a Death Cafe Guide” available online for the public, this project looks for the following behaviors to result:

- To provide a comfortable and safe space for individuals to share thoughts and feelings in a way which is inclusive and respectful.
- To promote open discussion about all things “ end of life”with a goal of enhancing our lives in the present.
- To provide a traditional Jewish perspective on a range of topics which may surface .
- To ensure that appropriate resource material and followup is available for individuals.

## CONDITIONS

In order to run a successful Cafe, the following conditions are required:

- A comfortable and accessible venue
- Skilled facilitators to get the conversation going and keep it on track
- Delicious refreshments
- Person/s knowledgeable in Jewish traditions and their underlying values

## DEGREE

- Any number of Cafes could be held in varied locations.
- Death Cafes could be offered in conjunction with other organizations

## III. PREPARATION

The organizers would become familiar with the Death Cafe guide and underlying principles before planning the event:

- Deciding on the size of the group. A group of 10 to 12 people is manageable by one or two facilitators . A larger group may be divided up and would require additional facilitators .

- Locating a venue which is accessible ( is there parking, is it near public transit).
- Arranging for refreshments ( Kashrut, dietary restrictions, allergies).
- Advertising and marketing the event :
  - City and community newspapers have Billboard sections, PSAs at no charge
  - Issue a press release to all local TV and radio stations, newspapers
  - Local TV and radio stations PSA's at no charge
  - Write an article and/ or place an ad in Jewish community paper
  - Jewish community organizations websites and bulletins
  - Develop a catchy logo to spark curiosity.
  - Social media: Start a Facebook page for the DC , invite friends and and post information there
  - Open an email account under the Death Cafe name and develop list of interested people
- Compile a Community contact sheet with emergency numbers and other support options
- Provide Jewish material and resources for further reading and discussion on a range of topics
- Create a sign in sheet with space for email addresses, and an evaluation form for participants

#### IV. QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES

- How to screen participants - Death Cafe is not a support group or bereavement counselling. Is pre-registration required for events? Should an organizer be in touch with each registered guest to ensure the event is an appropriate fit?
- How to select facilitators

#### V. EXAMPLE

In November 2013 a few interested Jewish community members met with the idea of bringing Death Cafe to Winnipeg. As the Jewish community non -profit funeral chapel and Chevra Kadisha, we took on this project even though it is not an exclusively Jewish concept.

We advertised widely in the Jewish community and asked people to pre-register so that we could be prepared. The response was far greater than we had anticipated. Our first Cafe, held in January 2014, had more than 60 participants.

Four events were hosted in Jewish venues over the winter of 2014. There were between 40 and 60 people at each event. While the age range was 19 to 90, the average age of the participants was 55 plus.

One event was held in conjunction with the Manitoba Multifaith Council at a local church. More than 70 attendees from all faiths attended.

For these Death Cafes, the venues were set up with round tables which could accommodate up to 10 people. We had several skilled facilitators, one at each table, to keep the conversation on track. Our facilitators were members of our volunteer Chevra Kadisha Board of Directors, newly-retired social workers, school guidance counsellors and other individuals who are comfortable with the topics and the accompanying emotions.

We had two hostesses for the events who welcomed people, distributed name tags and encouraged people to sign in with their email addresses. One of the hostesses then started the evening with introductions and a quick overview of Death Cafe principles. Everyone was encouraged to help themselves to refreshments. The table based conversations went on for about 75 minutes, at which time the hostess asked a representative from each table to share a few of the themes that came out of the discussion. We then did a short wrap up and distributed the evaluation forms. People lingered and continued to share with one another.

The evaluations were overwhelmingly positive, with many participants indicating they would attend future events. People felt affirmed, supported, and comforted that others also question and wonder. The level of personal sharing was truly astonishing as people opened up to strangers in ways they are unable to do with their loved ones.

Four events were held in partnership with Hospice and Palliative Care Manitoba in the winter of 2015, as part of their Grief Seminar program. These events featured a speaker and a topic, and had about a dozen attendees at each. We realized that the target audience for these Grief Seminars is people who are actively mourning, and the event became more of a bereavement support group than an open conversation.

Links:

Death Cafe [www.deathcafe.com](http://www.deathcafe.com)

Death Cafe How To Guide

[http://deathcafe.com/site\\_media/files/guide.pdf](http://deathcafe.com/site_media/files/guide.pdf)

Attachments:

DC Intro - For hosts

DC Press Release

DC Quotes -Conversation starters

Let's Talk about Dying -Winnipeg Free Press

DC Winnipeg Poster

DC Logo formatted for Facebook

## Bio

Rena Boroditsky is the Executive Director of the [Chesed Shel Emes](#), the non-profit Jewish funeral chapel and *Chevrah Kadisha* in Winnipeg, Canada. She has been a student and teacher of end-of-life Jewish rituals for more than 15 years. Rena has led sessions at [Kavod v'Nichum](#) conferences and at Limmud events in the US & Canada. She is a founding member of LimmudWinnipeg and recently launched Death Cafe Winnipeg. She has served as a board member of [Kavod v'Nichum](#), and has been a lecturer and student in the [Gamliel Institute](#).