

Local clergy to have end-of-life discussions with congregants

Rabbi Ronne Friedman joins 'The Conversation'

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[Rabbi Ronne Friedman of Temple Israel, Boston.](#)

In a society that celebrates life and youth, talking about death and dying often gets shoved under the rug. Rabbi Ronne Friedman of Temple Israel in Boston is trying to change this by joining interfaith clergy in The Conversation Project.

Started by acclaimed journalist Ellen Goodman in 2010, The Conversation Project brings together media, medical professionals, and clergy in a grassroots campaign to encourage people to discuss their end-of-life care wishes with their loved ones. According to the statistics gathered by The Conversation Project, 90 percent of the population says they believe they should talk about death, but only 30 percent actually do. "I'm very much persuaded that this kind of conversation is possible for everyone, but is one that is frequently avoided," Friedman said. "In the course of my rabbinate, I've seen situations in which the family was left with critical care decisions and didn't know what the individual him or herself would want because that person was not in the condition to provide that kind of response."



[Having the Conversation with loved ones is of vital importance.](#)

In addition to Temple Israel, about 30 congregations, including synagogues, churches, and mosques, are participating in The Conversation Project. "Conversation Sabbath," when rabbis, reverends, and

priests from these congregations will discuss the importance of having the Conversation with their congregants, will take place from Nov. 6 through 15.

As a follow-up, The Conversation Project's website (theconversationproject.org) guides them toward various legal and medical resources, directions on getting one's affairs in order, how to talk to doctors about end-of-life care, planning events in one's own community on addressing these issues, and more.

Friedman, who has touched upon the topic of death and end-of-life wishes in his sermons before The Conversation Project, said that "particularly within the last few years we had programs that addressed aspects of death and mourning; some of the practical things that people can do for themselves and people near to them and some of the more theological, philosophical conversations that are designed to help people think supportively about the fears and concerns that they have."

There is not necessarily a stigma surrounding death, but it is a topic that people are reluctant to address for many reasons. "Some of it revolves around fear, some of it revolves around the difficulty that most people have in confronting their own mortality," he said. "The idea of our non-being, as an intellectual exercise we may be able to deal with, but on an emotional level, it's very hard. But it's inevitable."

The over-medicalization of elderly patients in our society, makes the Conversation especially difficult, Friedman noted. "Prolonging life when it becomes more about quantity than quality, I think that is a conversation that is important for families to have," he said. "The number of people that I speak to are more focused about the quality of end-of-life."

Friedman referred to a story in the Talmud about the death of Judah HaNasi, the great rabbi of his time born eighty years after the destruction of the Second Temple to illustrate his point. When Ha-Nasi was on his death bed, all of his disciples were there praying for his life to continue and he could not die because their prayers were being answered. One of the servants, who recognized that HaNasi wanted to die, went up to the roof and dropped a glass jar to the ground. As it shattered, the noise shocked the group of fervent rabbis into silence. In that moment, HaNasi's soul left his body. "This maidservant understood something about end-of-life, which eluded the wise scholars," Friedman said. "On the one hand, they wanted to reinforce the value of life and on the other hand, didn't understand that permission to die is sometimes really important."

The Conversation Project aims to get families talking about the permission to die, especially with modern medicine's ability to prolong one's life when he or she is no longer comfortable, but is no longer able to communicate his or her wishes.

Another topic of discussion on death may be pre-planning a funeral and selecting a headstone, especially at a time "when people are not at their most vulnerable, when they are healthy and can think in that kind of way," Friedman said. "But in my mind that's a small category of what The Conversation Project intends."

Within the Jewish community, there are such diverse attitudes toward death, that he was reluctant to make any generalizations. The opinions of "a very traditional Jew and a liberal Jew immersed in science are probably very different," Friedman noted. "And yet, both are Jews and I would argue that both can find Jewish warrant for whatever their opinions are."

He did say that there are some differences between the Jewish community and the rest of American society when it comes to talking about death. "It's particularly fair to say that Judaism in celebrating confrontation with serious, critical questions in our lives may be somewhat different than the larger society," Friedman said. "The idea of the Conversation is entirely within Judaism's attitude toward an acknowledgment of mortality as a reality."

"There is an ethical maxim in Pirkei Avot that you should treat each day as the day before you die," he continued. "The message is pretty clear: don't engage in behaviors, thinking, 'I'm going to repent the next day.'"

In The Conversation Project, the idea is similar: "None of us knows what day may be our last, so take the step to put all the pieces in place, to know that you've done everything you could for the sake of your family and your own sake," Friedman said.