

5 Ways to mourn

the death of a loved one

As we enter into this week's Torah portion, we are led to ponder our own experiences of life and death, farewelling and burying family members, mourning the passing of a loved one and celebrating the blessings of his/her life. Over a meal or a cup of coffee, gather with other Torah-readers and share your responses to one or more of the reflections below.



1. In the Jewish mourning rite of 'sitting *shivah*,' after burying a parent, family members withdraw to their home for seven days to grieve and be comforted by visiting relatives. What mourning practices are part of your family life?



2. Sadly, how often we hear of families fighting over the contents of a deceased parent's will. Can we learn from the example of Joseph's peacemaking choices in today's Torah portion? (See Gen.50:19-21)



3. Jacob and Joseph both yearn to be buried at a place which is sacred to them because of family and faith. Is there a land or a place which is similarly precious to you and/or your family?



4. Gen.50:4-13 describes Jacob's funeral procession out of Egypt to Hebron as quite an event! Even the Egyptians mourn. Do you have strong memories of a funeral service, requiem Mass or wake powerfully celebrated?



5. In the bible, to live to see one's children's children is a sign of blessing. Joseph is abundantly blessed because he lives to see his great-grandchildren (50:23). Reflect on this grace or promise in your own life story.

This *Light of Torah* leaflet series for Catholic parishes encourages parishioners to be attentive to the gift of Torah as part of their sacred Scriptures, and to the gift of Judaism which gave us Jesus, the Living Torah. Text by Teresa Pirola. Illustrations by Francine Pirola. © The Story Source, 2010. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial church use. Further reading: www.lightoftorah.net; www.batkol.info and www.etz-hayim.com.



Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

Dear Reader,

If you have been following this *Light of Torah* series regularly you will know that, for the past eleven weeks, we have been 'tasting Torah' from the book of Genesis. We have considered brief passages, drawn from the narratives of creation, journey, romance, tumultuous family life, adventure, joyfulness, treachery, reconciliation.

Have you become more than a reader? Have you begun to become a student of the Torah? Are you bringing your questions and understandings to the Torah? Have you had the opportunity to share this adventure with a friend? Have the observations of the Sages heightened your own appreciation of the biblical stories?

What we are offering in this *Light of Torah* series is a fresh, vigorous, accessible engagement with the Word of God, specifically with the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament). We do so by drawing on the insights of a time-honored Jewish biblical tradition; insights that can enrich our own Catholic reading of the sacred texts. We do so in response to, and in the spirit of, Vatican II:

"Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues." (Nostra Aetate, 4)



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 47:28–50:26

As the Book of Genesis draws to a close, we find the elderly Jacob and his sons and their families still living in Egypt, having gone there to survive a famine. Our Torah portion contains two deathbed scenes: that of Jacob and his son Joseph. Both of them die what we might call ‘a good death,’ surrounded by family, mentally alert, able to impart blessings, say their ‘goodbyes’ and tie up loose ends. Not every family is so lucky. Even so, the history of tensions in Jacob’s and Joseph’s family life continue to emerge in this portion. Read the story for yourself, especially Gen.47 and Gen.50:14-26.

Sources: Goldstein (ed.), *The Women’s Torah Commentary* (Woodstock, Vermont, 2000); Schorsch, *Canon Without Closure* (NY, 2007). Scripture quotations: Chaim Stern (trans., 1999) in Goldstein.

Tasting Torah

When Israel’s time to die drew near, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, “If I have but found favor in your sight, please put your hand under my thigh and treat me with faithful kindness; please do not bury me in Egypt.” (47:29)

[Note: Jacob is also called ‘Israel.’

‘Your hand under my thigh’ = make an oath.]

The word *na*, often translated as ‘please,’ is repeated three times in the Hebrew text (‘please’ appears twice here in the English translation). Why this repetition, this insistence? V. 30 tells us that Jacob wants to be buried in the same place as his parents, grandparents and wife Leah; i.e., in the land of Canaan. Can you relate to his heartfelt wish? Why else does Jacob desire burial in Canaan?

Touching Torah

As we read on, Jacob repeats the blessing given to his ancestors: “*I will give this land [Canaan] to your seed after you as an everlasting possession*” (48:4). Despite the long sojourn in Egypt, the Torah never loses sight of the fact that the sacred destiny of Jacob’s progeny is the land promised by God. The same theme appears in Joseph’s dying wish: *When God brings you out of Egypt, swear to me you will carry my bones out with you.* (See 50:24-25.) It will be many generations before Joseph’s last wish is fulfilled (see Exodus 13:19). Ponder this heartfelt connection Jacob and Joseph have with the Promised Land. As a Christian, have you ever felt drawn to this Promised Land, the Holy Land?

Depthing Torah

The death of a family patriarch or matriarch can be unsettling for those left behind as they adjust to the new reality and re-negotiate familial roles. Our Torah portion reveals such a situation. Realizing that Jacob, their father, is dead, Joseph’s brothers fear that they are unprotected.

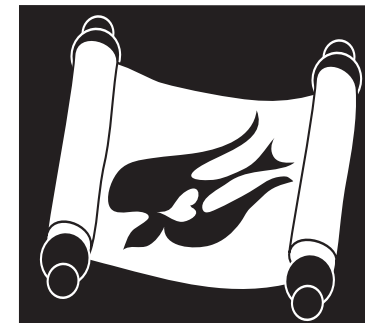
“Perhaps Joseph still bears us enmity and intends to repay us for all the harm we inflicted upon him!” (50:15). So they approach Joseph, saying, “*Your father left this charge before his death... ‘Thus shall you say to Joseph: Please, I beg of you, forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, though they inflicted harm upon you’*” (50:17).

But, say the commentators, here’s the problem: There is no evidence that Jacob ever said this! A patent lie! Is Joseph about to be mistreated by his brothers again? Is a family feud about to be reignited? How does Joseph respond?

The Torah tells us that “*Joseph wept as they spoke to him*” (50:17). He then reassures his brothers of his forgiveness and his confidence in God who brings good from every situation. Once again, Joseph meets a crisis point with mature faith and compassion.

Doing Torah

Before dying, Jacob and Joseph were able to bless their families and say goodbye. Has this been your family’s experience, or have you had the opposite experience of a life being brutally cut short without warning? Share some thoughts, then pray together for your deceased family members.



Faith & life

A religious brother shares this memory:

I recall my mother’s last words before her stroke in 1955: “Don’t upset me, I want to go to Communion tomorrow.” With that she collapsed. She remained very ill before passing away three years later. My mother was no towering person in the church or society, but I remember her as a woman of faith, hope and love who always welcomed those who came to her home. In sickness and in health she displayed these virtues. I remember the day of her burial. We gathered with members of the youth club, work friends, extended family and a large crowd of Brothers. We were all there to pay tribute to a valiant woman of faith.