



5 final words in the face of death

In the midrash we hear how Moses, a human being both heroic and flawed, was tenderly embraced by God at the moment of his death. In fact the midrash speaks of this moment as a divine ‘kiss.’ Imagine your final homecoming to God who is about to embrace you with divine tenderness. What final words do you wish to impart to loved ones: family, friends, faith family? Five thoughts follow.

1. Core values.

‘*Life has taught me that the single most precious thing is...*’ What core values, practices and priorities do you want to highlight in your words of farewell?

2. Dreams.

What hopes and dreams do you harbor for the future of your children, your successors, your family, your community, your church? How do you articulate these dreams?

3. Failings.

We all make mistakes, and our past is checkered with sin, both individual and communal. What do you wish to

say about past events that have been a source of alienation?

4. Things to avoid.

What is the one thing you ask your children, your family or your faith family to avoid at all costs?

5. One final word.

The great Rabbi Akkiva died a martyr’s death with the Hebrew word *ehad* (‘one’) on his lips, as he prayed ‘The Lord our God the Lord is one’ (Deut. 6:4). What final word do you wish to pass your lips in the face of death?

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

“*Sounding the depths of the mystery which is the church, this sacred council remembers the spiritual ties which link the people of the new covenant to the stock of Abraham.*” (Nostra Aetate, 4)

The Second Vatican Council ushered in a new age for Jewish-Christian relations. Not only did it decisively reject antisemitism, it positively affirmed the profound spiritual bond between Christianity and Judaism. It recognized that the Church traces its roots to the faith of the Jewish people with whom God’s ancient covenant was established and from whom came forth Jesus.

With this recognition, we can turn with even greater joy and expectation to the study of Torah with the help of the insights and expertise of the Jewish sages.

Torah, in its specific definition, refers to the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. These scriptures, preserved and held sacred by the Jewish people, are precious to Christians too. They are part of the foundations upon which the gospel testimony rests.



Deuteronomy 1:1—3:22

Devarim: ‘words’



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 1:1—3:22

Today we begin a new book, Deuteronomy. Its Hebrew title, *Devarim*, means ‘words.’ What ‘words’? The opening verse tells us that these are the farewell speeches of Moses to the people of Israel as they stand on the plains of Moab, ready to make their final journey, across the Jordan River, to enter the promised land. They will make this journey without Moses who prepares to die as the Lord foretold (Numbers 27:13).

Tasting Torah

In today’s Torah portion Moses reviews the travels of the Israelites from Mt Sinai. The events he recounts—the establishment of leaders, the sin of the spies, their encounters with foreign nations—have already been told in the books of Exodus and Numbers. Now Deuteronomy records Moses’ memoirs in 1:5 – 3:11. Do you notice anything unusual? If you have been following our Torah journey, perhaps you notice some interesting discrepancies in Moses’ retelling here.

Touching Torah

Moses’ recall of events is not identical to the stories told earlier in the Torah. E.g., here, the appointment of leaders is presented as Moses’ idea rather than that of his father-in-law, Jethro (cf. Exodus 18:17f.); here, God bars Moses from the Promised Land because of the spies’ sin rather than Moses’ actions (cf. Numbers 20:12); here, the battles against Sichon and Og were divinely pre-ordained victories rather than unplanned occurrences (cf. Numbers 32).

What is going on? Something very ancient, very Jewish, and embedded also in our own Christian tradition: the ongoing interpretation of the biblical text. The Word of God is not a dead letter to be studied like a petrified fossil; it is a living Word that speaks ‘heart to heart’ and is received afresh by each new generation of believers. And how early this process of interpretation begins: we see it occurring here within the biblical text itself!

Depthing Torah

What else can we glean from Moses’ memoirs? He tells and interprets events for a reason. This is not self-indulgent reminiscing; this is a leader preparing his people, a younger generation which has no memories of its parents’ slavery, for the next critical stage of nationhood. What vital lessons are being taught at this point? What aspects of the journey would you highlight, if you were Moses?

Some contemporary Torah commentators explore a psychological profile of Moses, likening his struggles to those of parenthood. He is a great leader, yes, but also a flawed human being struggling to come to grips with the past forty years and his hopes and dreams for his children, even blaming them as a projection of his own unresolved issues. Our Torah portion reveals a profound *I-Thou* relationship between Moses and the Israelites (note the repetition of the word ‘you’ punctuating his speech); yet it is a relationship laden with conflict and alienation as much as intimacy. As a parent, pastor or community leader, can you relate to Moses’ sacrifices, heroism, weaknesses and struggles?

Doing Torah

We are considering Moses’ final words. Have you ever been with someone who was close to death and who shared some final words with you? What was that experience like for you? If you had only a short time to live, what words would you most wish to speak, and to whom? (Refer to back page.)



From the midrash

The Book of Deuteronomy opens with:

“These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel...”

The midrash (Deut.R.1.7) observes that Moses, here at the end of his mission, is a man of words, a fluent speaker. Yet at the outset of his calling he said to the Lord, *“I am slow of speech”* (Exodus 4:10). Ponder this detail. Was Moses just being humble about his verbal abilities, or did he grow into his calling as prophet and leader?

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (NY, 2008), p.1058; Rav David Silverberg’s parashah commentary: www.vbm-torah.org/archive/intparsha/devarim/44-62devarim.doc.