



5 Ways to mourn the death of a loved one

In 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 loved ones and celebrating the blessings of their lives. 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 in life do we hear of families fighting over the contents of a deceased parent's will. What can we learn from the example of Joseph's peace-making 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..



Light of Torah
www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
© Light of Torah, 2010

Light of Torah is a ministry arising from the Catholic community. In the spirit of Vatican II's call to Jewish-Christian reconciliation, Light of Torah encourages Torah reflection in homes and parishes, drawing on the insights of Jewish interpretative traditions. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial pastoral use.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Genesis 47:28—50:26

Vayechi:
'he lived'

Why reflect on Torah?

Dear Reader,

If you have been following this *Light of Torah* series 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 this *Light of Torah* series offers is a fresh, accessible engagement with the Word of God, specifically with the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament). It does so by drawing on the insights of Jewish interpretative traditions; insights that can enrich our own Christian reading of the sacred text and draw us closer to our Jewish brothers and sisters.



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, able to 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 Genesis 47 and 50:14-26.

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. Why this repetition, this insistence? Verse 30 tells us that Jacob wishes 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. What experiences and connections do you have with the Holy Land?

Depthing Torah

The death of a patriarch or matriarch can be unsettling for those left behind as they adjust to the new family reality and re-negotiate roles. Our Torah portion reveals such a situation. Realizing that their father Jacob 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 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 brutally cut short without warning? Share a thought; pray together for your deceased family members.



Faith & life

A religious brother shares this memory:

My mother was very ill for three years before passing away. She was no towering person in 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.

Bibliography: Goldstein, ed., *The Women’s Torah Commentary* (Woodstock, 2000); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, rev. ed. (NY, 2005, 2006); Schorsch, *Canon Without Closure* (NY, 2007). Scripture: Plaut.