



# Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

## When Jacob died...

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. These final chapters contain 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 these passages. Read the story for yourself, especially Genesis 47 and 50:14-26, then let's explore the text with the help of wisdom from Jewish interpretative traditions.

*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." (Genesis 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?

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.

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 text reveals such a situation. Realizing that their father Jacob is dead, Joseph's brothers fear that they are unprotected. They say:

*"Perhaps Joseph still bears us enmity and intends to repay us for all the harm we inflicted upon him!"*

*So they brought a charge to 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" (Genesis 50:15-17).*

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.

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. •

Sources: 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.