

5 Final Words in the face of death

Jewish storytelling traditions hold that Moses, a human being both heroic and flawed, experienced the moment of death as a divine ‘kiss.’ Such an image of tenderness. Imagine God about to embrace you with the divine kiss. What final words do you wish to impart to loved ones: family, friends, faith family?



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?



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?



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?



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



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?

In the Light of Torah is a parish leaflet series designed to encourage Christians to be more attentive to the gift of Torah as part of their own 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, 2009. Further reading: www.batkol.info. Reproduction of this leaflet permitted for non-commercial church use.



In the 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.” (NA, 4)

The Second Vatican Council ushered in a new age for Jewish-Christian relations. Not only did it decisively reject any trace of anti-Semitism, it positively affirmed the profound spiritual bond between Christianity and Judaism. It recognized that the Church owes its very existence to the faith of the Jewish people with whom God’s ancient covenant was established and who brought forth Jesus himself.

With this recognition, we can turn with even greater joy and expectation to the study of Torah. 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 Jews for thousands of years, are precious to Christians too. They are essential to the biblical foundations upon which the New Testament rests.

In the spirit of Vatican II, this weekly leaflet series, *In the Light of Torah*, offers a means for Christians to reflect on Torah, refreshed by Jewish insights and traditions which—although part of our biblical and faith heritage—many Christians have not heard before.



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 is preparing to die as the Lord foretold (Num. 27:13).

Tasting Torah

In today's 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. Ex.18:17f.); here, God bars Moses from the Promised Land because of the spies' sin rather than Moses' actions (cf. Num. 20:12); here, the battles against Sichon and Og were divinely pre-ordained victories rather than unplanned occurrences (cf. Num.32).

What is going on? Something very ancient, very Jewish, and also deeply embedded in our own Christian tradition: nothing less than the ongoing interpretation of the biblical text. The Word of God is not a dead letter to be studied like a petrified fossil, but rather 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: it is occurring here within the biblical text itself!

Deeper into Torah

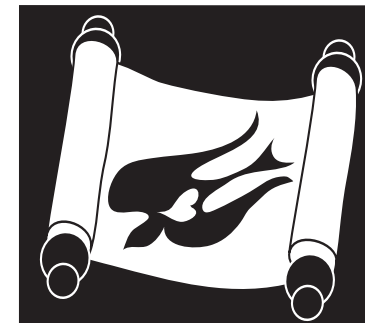
What else can we glean from Moses' memoirs? He tells and interprets events for a reason. This is not self-indulgent reminiscing; this is a leader preparing his people, a younger generation with no memories of their parents' slavery, for the next critical stage of nationhood. What vital lessons are being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

Some Torah commentators* explore a psychological profile of Moses, and liken his struggles to 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 how the repetition of the word 'you' punctuates his speech like a drumbeat), yet one laden with as much conflict and alienation as intimacy. As a parent, pastor or community leader, can you relate to Moses' sacrifices, heroism, weaknesses and struggles?

Doing Torah

Have you ever been with someone who was close to death and who shared some final words with you? Tell us something of that experience.

If you had only a short time to live, what words would you most wish to speak, and to whom?



Faith & Life

"I am part of a large extended family, which includes many strong-willed personalities. It is a loving but volatile family dynamic. We gather regularly and enjoy ourselves, even though 'this person is not talking to that person,' or 'So-and-so refused to come today because...' My father (now deceased) often used to say, 'Never burn your bridges' and 'Always leave a door open.' I think his wisdom has helped to keep us together. Yes, we have our fights, and at times somebody walks away, but never to the point of no return."

* E.g., Deborah Green in Eskenazi & Weiss, p.1058.

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