



**Torah Reflections on *Parashat Pinhas*
Numbers 25:10-30:1
19 Tammuz 5769 July 11, 2009**

Parashat Pinhas jars us to confront our mortality. As I write this, I observe the anniversary of my mother's death from cancer by lighting a *yahrzeit* (memorial) candle and by saying *kaddish* at services. I think back to my mom's last day in the hospital for the terminally ill where she lay quiet, unresponsive with her disquieting rasping breath. Hospice care had graciously provided the aggressive comfort measures that we asked for as we waited for her to die. My sister, father and I were with her in shifts holding her hands, speaking to her of our love and caressing her. She had just viewed for the first time her second grandson, Gabriel, and was able to let go of her pain and to die in peace surrounded by her family. As we said good bye for the night, we kissed her and left the room. My mom had died before we arrived at the elevator. Immediately before she expired, she exclaimed, "Mother!" as she saw her mom, according to the nurse. Viewing her newest grandson, being kissed by her family, and being reunited with deceased loved ones, paved the way for her good death.

In the *parasha*, Moses confronts his mortality, "And God said to Moses, Get up into this Mount Abarim, and see the land which I have given to the people of Israel. And when you have seen it, you also shall be gathered to your people..." (Numbers 27:12-13). Like my mom, Moses wanted to see the labor of his dreams, the Promised Land. After forty years of wandering and wondering if they would ever get there, God informs Moses of the verdict. Because of the sin of Meriba, he will not be able to enter, only to gaze from afar. But Moses had such a special relationship with God, that according to one Midrash, God kissed Moses and he was gathered to his people without a peep of protest. Rather than bemoaning his fate, Moses calmly accepts his finitude. He finishes his earthly responsibilities by asking God to appoint a new leader.

Moses' death in this *parasha* teaches us how to live. Death becomes a chance to do a *heshbon nefesh* (inner reckoning) as to how we live. Success may be defined as looking into your grandchildren's eyes and smiling; for Moses, it included passing on the torch of leadership to his Divinely picked successor Joshua by the laying on of hands. Only then is he prepared to die, knowing that the next generation is taken care of.

We can emulate Moses in modern times, preparing for our own deaths by attending to medical health care directives to guide our caregivers in our medical wishes; ethical wills to inspire our heirs with the values we lived; and living eulogies/funeral instructions to help the bereaved and funeral director plan the funeral. All these preparations can help give us the piece of mind to accept death as Moses did and merit a good death. We can also use the traditional Jewish prayer for the dying, the *Viddui*, final confessional, to say good bye and let go. This may be read by the ill person or on his/her behalf. After imploring God for a *refuah shleimah*, the prayer asks God to forgive us of any sins we

may have committed and to look after our loved ones. While *refuah shleimah* is frequently translated as “speedy recovery”, here it can mean a healing of peace or a complete healing. While it is doubtful that the terminally ill may have a speedy recovery, if they prepare for dying after living a full life, they may merit a good death as Moses did, and die in peace with the kiss of God on their lips.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Eliot J. Baskin, D.Min., Jewish Community Chaplaincy & Rafael Spiritual Healing Center of Jewish Family Service of Colorado. The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties), an affiliate of the Institute on Aging. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.Jewishhealingcenter.org.



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