



How to Give a D'var Torah

FIRST CLASS:
BASICS
STEPHEN SCHMIDT 12/2/20

How to Give a D'var Torah

Class #1: D'var Torah Basics

This class:

1. What is a d'var Torah? Why do we give them?
2. Six kinds of divrei Torah
3. How do I construct a d'var Torah?
4. How do I give my d'var Torah?

Next class: Sources for divrei Torah (an overview of the Rabbinic tradition) and finding material on Sefaria.org

What is a d'var Torah?

Literally – A word of Torah (teaching)

More specifically: A short talk (or group discussion) about some topic in the Torah

Why do we do divrei Torah?

Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon said: “When two Jews are together and do not exchange words of Torah, this is a session of scorners.... But when two Jews are together and exchange words of Torah, the Divine Presence is among them.” (Pirkei Avot 3:3)

Anyone can do one!

“The Torah is like a mirror. Every person looks into a mirror and sees a different face.”

– Rabbi Harold Kushner

“There is no ‘right answer’ (or even ‘right question’) in any d’var Torah. Interpretations of Torah, and Torah itself, exist on multiple levels. As Joel Rosenberg has said, ‘The true sacredness of a text, then, rests in its power to generate interpretation.’ Don’t be afraid of finding or saying something ‘new’.”

- www.kolel.org

Sources to use on how to give a d’var Torah:

In print: “How to Give a D’var Torah – A Beginner’s Guide,” Rabbi Richard Israel. Reprinted in *The Kosher Pig and Other Curiosities of Modern Jewish Life*

Online: “How to Write a D’var Torah” from MyJewishLearning:

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/dvar-torah-preparation/>

Some simple rules

1. Know what the audience expects: length, content, response

Agudat Achim rules: 6-8 minutes, include something from the weekly parashah, and avoid controversial matters

2. Share something you have learned that you found interesting

3. KISS – focus on one principal idea that you want the audience to get

4. Both the traditional and the contemporary have something to say

Six common types of divrei Torah (from Rabbi Israel)

1. The Microscope

Example: “When Jacob goes to find Rachel, the Torah says he “lifted his feet.” What do we learn from this unusual expression?

(Find an answer in commentary!)

2. The Airplane

Example: “The story of Noah is about G-d developing patience with human imperfection.”

Two more types

3. The Diving Board (and its evil twin, the Snuff Box)

Example: “In today’s portion we discuss the clothing worn by the High Priest in the Tabernacle. But Jews have often used special clothing to establish a sense of spirituality.”

Then you can talk about tallitot even though the portion has nothing to do with them.

“A visiting maggid, or preacher, used to go from one community to the next. Just before he began his only sermon, his snuff box would drop out of sight. ‘Where is it?’ he would ask loudly. ‘It has vanished, swallowed up the way the earth swallowed up Korah and his company ... which reminds me of an important thought about Korah.’”

4. The Biblical Personality

Example: “At the start of this week’s portion, Esau is surprisingly forgiving of his brother.”

Last two types

5. The Puzzle

Example: “Light was created on the first day of creation, while the sun and the moon were not created until the fourth. Where did the original light come from?”

Again, commentary will help solve the puzzle

6. The Historian

Example: “There are surprising parallels between the Torah’s account of Noah’s flood, and the flood story told in the Epic of Gilgamesh in Sumerian legend.”

Allows you to set the portion in historical context

How do I prepare a d'var Torah?

In four steps:

1. Read the portion
2. Reflect on the portion
3. Read commentaries/sources to follow your reflections
4. Prepare the talk

Reading the portion

The goal – to find something that interests you enough to learn more about it.
If you have something to talk about already – to find a way to connect it to the portion.

Start several weeks in advance when possible – read more than one translation, plus the original Hebrew if you can – ignore comments the first time.

Asking questions of the portion

Common types of questions (compiled from kolel.org):

1. How does this section relate to modern times?
2. How has this observance changed?
3. How can we relate to a text that conflicts with modern ideas?
4. What does God do in the portion, and what does it tell us about God?
5. What does this text tell us about good and evil?
6. What is the role of a ritual in our lives?
7. What moral or ethical lessons can we learn?

Reflect on the portion

Allow time for this. One option is to go back through the portion again a week after your first reading. Look for contemporary matters to which the portion can speak.

“A successful d’var Torah both has insight into the Torah text and insight into our lives today. If people say “Wow, I didn’t know why some people have blue threads in their tzitzit”, and “When and how do I identify myself as Jewish by the things I wear?” then the d’var Torah has worked on both levels.

Read commentaries / sources

If something interests you, it has probably interested someone else too. Look at what others have said; see if you like their response or not.

What types of commentators? Ancient midrash – medieval commentators – modern scholarship – history – comparative religion – compilations of many different sources. (Much more on this in class #2.)

Prepare the talk

Decide what you want the audience to learn from your talk – have a bottom-line message

Focus your comments on that point

If you have several ideas, begin preparing more than one of them, and see what flows well and what doesn't.

Save extra ideas for next time (often they can be connected to another portion of the Torah as well as (or better than!) this one).

Check facts – historical with Encyclopedia Judaica or similar, ritual with Rabbi Spitzer

Work from an outline

From Rafi Zarum on kolel.org:

1. Background/context
2. The relevant text
3. Pose a question about the text
4. Explain some commentaries
5. Give your own personal input
6. Interrelate everything
7. Wrap it up

From Rabbi Daniel Pressman on jccla.org:

1. The verses under discussion
2. A problem that this text raises.
3. Some answers from commentaries
4. Your personal preference
5. Practical application
6. Summary and conclusion

Writing up talk notes

Write a first draft a week ahead, then edit it

Avoid some beginner's mistakes:

1. Don't summarize the portion if it has just been read – don't forget to summarize the portion (or at least the section you draw on) if it has not
2. Don't feel obliged to completely solve the problem. If you have a solution, that's great. But giving people a good problem to reflect on is perfectly fine too. Or giving a choice of several solutions that have been proposed is fine too.
3. Don't make mistakes of fact – use references to check, such as Encyclopedia Judaica
4. Don't assume you have to do it the way a rabbi would do it. Thinking about Torah is for everyone, not just the rabbis!

Giving the d'var Torah

Speaking in public is a challenge – but you can do it!

Take time to prepare your material and be comfortable with it

The audience does not bite; if you are comfortable, they will be too.

Practice the night before – give it to one person, or just give it to the mirror.

Time your practice, because that is the only way to be sure how long it is.

What to say

1. Use notes - avoid reading the text word for word if you can.
(But better to read it word for word than to get lost in mid-d'var. If you feel better reading it, then do so.)
2. It is OK to ad-lib if something strikes you during the talk, but do not go too far from your prepared notes or text – you may lose the focus, and you may go over time.
3. A little bit of humor can be a good way to warm up the audience, especially at the start of the talk, but more than one is usually too much.

What to do

1. Make eye contact with the audience, especially friendly faces, but don't forget to look at your notes every once in a while too.
2. Do what makes you comfortable. Stand behind the podium, or don't. Use gestures, or don't. Dress a little more formally than you usually do, or don't.
3. Remember always your goal – to share something you learned about the Torah with the community.
4. Wish everyone “Shabbat Shalom” at the end. (They may say back “Yesher koach” which is a nice thing for them to say.)