

***How to Give a D'var Torah***  
***Class #1: D'var Torah Basics***  
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## **1. 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 Prepare a D’var Torah” from Kolel: The Adult Centre for Liberal Jewish Learning: [http://www.kolel.org/torahstory/dvar\\_home.html](http://www.kolel.org/torahstory/dvar_home.html)

### **Some simple rules for composing a d'var Torah**

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 principle idea that you want the audience to get
4. Both the traditional and the contemporary have something to say

## **Six types of divrei Torah (from Rabbi Israel)**

1. The Microscope
2. The Airplane
3. The Diving Board (and its evil twin, the Snuff Box)
4. The Personality
5. The Puzzle
6. The Historian

## **2. How do I prepare a d'var Torah?**

In four steps:

1. Read the portion
2. Reflect on the portion
3. Read commentaries
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.

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**

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

What types of commentators? Ancient midrash – medieval commentators – modern scholarship – 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 - 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).

Work from an outline. Two typical outlines:

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

Not all follow this sort of outline, but many do. Sometimes the points come in a different sequence; in particular, sometimes the problem is first (from outside the Torah) and the Torah text comments on the problem.

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!

### **3. How do I give a d'var Torah?**

For many people, this is the hardest part of the whole process – speaking in public. But most people get over the stage fright aspect very quickly. The audience does not bite. If you take time to prepare your material and are comfortable with it, you will probably be comfortable with your audience too.

1. Use notes, but 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'rash. 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.
4. 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. (With experience you may not need to do this, but it's a very good idea to do it the first few times.)
5. Make eye contact with the audience, especially friendly faces, but don't forget to look at your notes every once in a while too.
6. 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.
7. Remember always your goal – to share something you learned about the Torah with the community.
8. Wish everyone “Shabbat Shalom” at the end. (They may say back “Yeshet koach” which is a nice thing for them to say.)