

How to Give a D'var Torah
Class #2: D'var Torah Sources
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Jews have commented on the Torah since it was written:

Traditional view: Revealed at Sinai, c. 1200 BCE

Scholarly view: Compiled from earlier/oral sources around the time of the Babylonian Exile, c. 550 BCE

Four types of traditional commentary (Eitz Chayim, p. 1494):

1. P'shat – the literal meaning of the text
2. Remez – allegorical interpretation of the text
3. D'rash – reading additional meanings into the text
4. Sod – mystical meanings in the text (eg, gematria)

All four types are useful, but the first and third (p'shat and d'rash) are most common in divrei Torah

Modern commentary (Eitz Chayim, p. 1499):

1. Treats the Bible as a human-written document, subject to the same types of literary inquiry as other human-written documents
2. Interprets the Bible in its historical/cultural context
3. Compare the standard (Masoretic) text to other versions (eg, Septuagint)

Torah commentaries (almost all available in the Agudat Achim library) useful for preparing divrei Torah, in roughly chronological order:

Ancient era: Midrash

Midrash: As the name suggests, d'rash commentary.

The primary method of commentary until about 1000 CE

Initial compilations on Torah as early as 500 CE

Genesis 21:9: Rabbi Akiva lectured: “Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, making sport.” Now, “making sport” refers to nothing but immorality, as in the verse “The Hebrew servant, who you have brought to us, came into me to make sport of me” (Gen. 39:17). This teaches that Sarah saw Ishmael ravish maidens, seduce married women, and dishonor them. Rabbi Ishamel taught: This term “sport” refers to idolatry, as in the verse “let the young men, I pray thee, arise and sport before us” (II Samuel 11:14)....

Medieval era: Commentary

Deals primary with p'shat, explaining the literal meaning of the text.
Very frequently cited by later commentaries.

Earliest major commentary: Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhak (RaSHI)

11th century, Troyes (France)

Very complete, accessible to beginners, has many levels

Question-and-answer format (without the questions)

Another important commentary: Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (RaMBaN)

13th century Spain

Responding to Rashi and to Ibn Ezra (another Spanish commentary)

Opposed to Maimonides on the value of secular knowledge

Influenced by Kabbalistic ideas

Genesis 23:3-4: Avraham rose from the presence of his dead [wife] and spoke to the sons of Chet, saying, "I am a foreigner and a resident among you. Grant me the possession of a grave site with you, so that I may bury my dead from my presence."

Rashi: (Asking implicitly: Why does he say "I am a foreigner and a resident among you"?) "A stranger from another land and I have settled among you." The Midrashic explanation is: If you will agree [to my request] then I am a stranger – if not, then I will be as a settler and I will rightfully take it. For God has told me, "To your descendants I will give this land."

Modern Traditional Commentaries

Hertz, Pentateuch and Haftorahs – 1936

Chief Rabbi of the British Empire

A traditional response to modern scholarship

"The blue book"

Soncino Chumash – 1947

Summary of the most important medieval commentators

Nehama Liebowitz – started 1942

Professor of Bible, Tel Aviv University

Study sheets on each of the parshayot

Draws on traditional commentaries and close reading of text

Modern Scholarly Commentaries

JPS Torah Commentary – 1989

Respectful of tradition but draws on modern scholarship

Non-profit society dedicated to disseminating Jewish works in English

Anchor Bible – started 1964 and continuing

Major scholarly project, drawing on all aspects of modern approaches

Very detailed, hard to use

We only have one volume (Genesis)

Everett Fox, Five Books of Moses – 1997

Focuses on language, trying to capture words, language-play, rhythm and force of the original Hebrew language - poetic

Based on a German translation by Buber and Rosenzweig, but new

Richard Friedman, Commentary on the Torah – 2003

A completely new translation and personal commentary

Focus on the straightforward meaning of the text

Robert Alter, Five Books of Moses – 2004

Focuses on the literary character of the Bible

Presents the text as a single consistent treatment of characters

The Jewish Study Bible – 2003

Widely regarded but not available here and I haven't read it

Movement Chumashim

Conservative: Eitz Chayim, interesting essays in the back. "The red book." 2001

Reform: The Torah: A modern commentary, Gunther Plaut. Gleanings section contains short interesting reflections. 1981, revised 2005

Orthodox: Stone Chumash. Contains Rashi's commentary. 1993 (not at AA)

Collections

Collections contain a range of pre-modern material, often including Chasidic stories hard to find elsewhere. Not usually as scholarly as full commentaries and thus more accessible. Some examples in our library:

Legends of the Jews, Louis Ginsberg

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Sefer Ha-Aggadah, Bialik and Rawnitzky

A Rabbinic Anthology, Montefiore and Loewe

Wellsprings of Torah, A.Z. Friedman

A Torah Commentary for Our Times, Harvey Fields: Has some modern material too