

# Tips on Preparing & Delivering a D'var Torah

By Rabbi Richard Israel

## What is the point of the d'var Torah?

A d'var Torah can set the mood or tone of a meeting. It can provide students, lay leaders, and professionals an opportunity for accessible individual Torah study.

All divrei Torah should have a point. Are you interested in giving the community a directive? Would you like to see an improvement in the way the world works? Or would you like to immerse yourself in questions of textual criticism and interpretation – making observations instead of giving advice?

How do you write a d'var Torah?

First, read the text. There are weekly Torah portions, or parshiot, from which you can choose to discuss. There are many translations of a text, with and without commentary. Pick a part of the text that interests you to discuss. The text can give the d'var Torah its authority. However, the text only goes so far, and you need to elaborate to make your point.

It can often help to map out what you want to say:

**The Introduction:** Grab the audience's attention. Find a way to immediately capture the audience's attention. Often a quotation that the audience is familiar with, an amusing story or joke, or a glimpse into your own personal life may be effective.

Think about using inclusive language here – “we” “us” and “our”, instead of “I” “me” and “mine” – it will embrace the audience and let them feel more a part of the d'var Torah.

**Thesis:** State your point – clearly. Just like writing a research paper, having a thesis statement is crucial to any d'var Torah. It is essential for both the audience and the author to understand exactly what is going to happen.

This will help you when you write and also allow the audience to anticipate where you're going. It will get their minds thinking about the argument you have to set out to prove (or discuss). Most importantly, it will immediately contextualize for them everything else you have to say.

**Sources, Analyses, Connections:** Support your thesis. Provide evidence and interpretation of why what you said is correct, of why your point is valid and relevant. Make connections

between different topics you bring up, and attempt to bring everything that you have said together.

The body of your d'var Torah should demonstrate to the audience your understanding of the material you have presented. Try to anticipate questions they might have and answer them.

When using quotations and texts, it is important to consider an interesting tension: which is more important – using sources with which your audience is familiar; or original sources that will provide them with new insight? Be conscious of this tension, especially when using clichéd or canonical sources.

Even things that many people consider to not be sources at all can contribute positively to a d'var Torah. Examples are songs, poetry, quotations, literature, stories, and life experiences.

**Conclusion:** Knock their socks off. Making a strong ending will leave the audience with a lasting impression of your d'var Torah. It can hammer home the points you've been trying to make and put a nice ribbon on the intellectual and religious package you've presented them. Coming full circle from your introduction, or providing another quotation or anecdote can create a powerful ending.

## DVAR TORAH WORKSHEET

1. Summarize a *mitzvah* from the Torah portion for the week:
2. Using a Bible with interpretation, draw from the interpretation you identify with. Summarize interpretations of these sources.
3. Present your own interpretation of the Torah portion's *mitzvah*, including its relevance to you, YLC and today's world.

## ONLINE DVAR TORAH RESOURCES

[www.aish.com](http://www.aish.com)

<http://www.usy.org/yourusy/reled/dt/>

[http://www.usy.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/USY\\_Dvar\\_Torah-resources-2009.pdf](http://www.usy.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/USY_Dvar_Torah-resources-2009.pdf)

<http://www.torah.org>

<http://shamash.org/tanach/dvar.shtml#shamash>

[www.myjewishlearning.com](http://www.myjewishlearning.com)

[www.urj.org](http://www.urj.org)

## **Hints to Good Speech Writing**

Write Formally. Although we are often tempted to be self-referential in our divrei Torah, it is usually advisable not to include the intricacies of our thought process in the final draft. Just like in writing a research paper, we don't feel obligated to write "I believe..." or "So I was thinking..." we should realize that everything we saw in a d'var Torah will be assumed by the audience to be our own thoughts. Writing formally does not mean that a d'var Torah should not include personal anecdotes, thoughts, or feelings. The key here is to make the delivery as fluid as possible and to focus on the texts, rather than the author's self-discovery in the process of writing.

Be confident. A common tendency in writing divrei Torah is to self-deprecate. We tend to like to begin with, "I don't think this is really good..." or "I was asked to deliver this yesterday, so don't blame me if it's bad..." This type of self-deprecating tone in the d'var Torah draws the attention away from the viability of creative thoughts and of the author's work and puts the focus on the haphazard or unsure nature in which the writer wrote the d'var Torah. Believe in yourself, and the audience will be much more likely to believe in you.

## **Reminders on Public Speaking**

Make Eye Contact! Nothing is more important in public speaking than making eye contact with your audience. If you are worried about breaking out into laughter or not being able to focus, a good replacement for real eye contact is picking a few points on the back wall of the room in which you're speaking and glancing at them every once in a while.

Have your d'var Torah written. For everyone's sake, including your own, have the entirety of your speech written out in front of you. Using index cards or notes poses a number of logistical concerns – not the least of which is losing your train of thought in the middle of your d'var Torah or forgetting a point you wanted to make because you just assumed you'd remember it. Additionally we often organize our thoughts in a certain way before we get up to speak, only to forget exactly how we wanted to say something when we get up in front of a group. Therefore, having the d'var written can help as a reference.

Be calm. Do your best to breathe normally and take your time when delivering a d'var Torah. Pause at commas, and breathe as often as you need. If you've written your d'var Torah well, it will allow itself the type of rhythmic spacing that provides you opportunities to breathe. Dramatic pauses enhance the suspense and the power of your rhetoric, and your own calmness will put the audience at ease.