



Guide for the Perplexed Dvar-Giver

Mazal tov and thank you for taking an interest in giving a dvar Torah at Congregation Beth Am! We take pride in our members' participation in all aspects of Beth Am, especially in religious services. The dvar Torah is a chance for you to learn, teach, and encourage deepening understanding of and involvement with the Torah and Judaism. English is fine. There is no requirement for Hebrew.

What is a dvar Torah? Typically, the dvar is a sermon given during religious services. The format tends to be lecture followed by discussion. Less frequently, someone reads a short story or teaches how to do something, such as how to do the priestly blessing. Please encourage discussion and participation by everyone present who indicates interest in doing so. You may give a brief summary of the Torah portion of the week (the parashat ha-shavua) and then focus on specific aspects of the portion, such as how to find its relevance in our lives. Occasionally, the focus is on the Haftarah portion for that week, a holiday, life cycle event, or customs - such as mourning practices. This is our time to study Torah. Even taking "Torah" broadly, this is not the place for personal anecdotes or political speeches.

How long? The dvar tends to last no more than ten minutes. Please be attentive to the time. If we are running late, shorten your dvar accordingly. Try to make the time in advance of services to clue the service leader (shaliah tzibur) about what you will cover so that person does not discuss the same area.

How do you prepare? Study the portion of the Torah and Haftarah. Which portion? The person scheduling your dvar and the service leader are good people to check with. Check a Jewish calendar for the Torah and Haftarah portion as well as holidays and significant events. Look at several commentaries – printed and on-line. It is appropriate to credit your sources. This is amateur to the extent that we are "amateurs" - that is, we love what we are doing and we do it for the love of it.

For material, there are numerous commentaries, including in the Hertz edition of the Chumash (Bible) that we use. On-line sources include www.aish.com

www.chabad.org

www.urj.org

www.jrf.org

www.uscj.org

www.myjewishlearning.com

We take seriously this opportunity to learn and to share with the congregation. Please encourage mutual respect by spending appropriate effort to research and present. If you do not have adequate time to prepare, contact the person who scheduled your dvar as soon as possible so that someone else will be asked to handle the dvar. Questions? Please ask the service leader or a member of the Ritual Committee.

Toda raba! (Thank you!)

Congregation Beth Am Ritual Committee, January, 2007



What Is a D'var Torah and How to Create One that is Meaningful and Inspiring by Rabbi Goldie Milgram

So a pulpit or other forum will be handed over to you, exciting and a bit scary perhaps. You will have the responsibility of helping your community to find meaning for living from within the *parsha*, the Torah portion for the week. Giving over meaningful guidance on the Torah portion during a religious service is not so much a speech as it is a *mitzvah*, a sacred act called "giving a *d'var Torah*." A *d'var*, "a word" of Torah, is a brief teaching where you connect your Torah portion with the heart, mind and spirit of those present. Israelis often refer to this practice as a *derasha*, or *drash*, an "explanation" of the Torah portion. There are 54 Torah portions read over the course of one year, and returned to with fresh eyes and the lens of expanded life experience every year.

While often given as an oral presentation, a *Torah teaching* can take many forms. Whether you can offer a self-crafted talk, play, satire, ballad, dance, visual art, poetry or other formats will depend upon local norms, the flexibility of your setting and your own talents. This is a precious opportunity which is meant to reflect who you are as a member of your community and to relate those ideals, concerns and ideas that you believe will be meaningful to those in attendance.

For a full chapter on this subject replete with examples, guides to delivering your d'var and ways to evaluate a successful d'var Torah, please obtain a copy of *Make Your Own Bar/Bat Mitzvah: A Personal Guide to Creating a Meaningful Rite of Passage*, Chapter Five covers this topic creatively, supportively and in-depth. If you need help, a phone consultation is available, rates on a gentle sliding scale (ReclaimingJudaism.org is a non-profit), [email](mailto:goldie@reclaimingjudaism.org) to set an appointment.

Some recommended steps; these can't all be done in one day. Take your time, a d'var Torah is rarely a spiritual emergency. If you accept a date to give one, make sure it's well in advance so you can enjoy the process, it's a beautiful and usually powerful experience:

First, find the Torah portion that you will be studying. Be sure to have a couple of different translations available, because Hebrew is wonderfully nuanced and each word can yield slightly or greatly different interpretations depending upon the individual or team who are providing the text in the language(s) you understand.

Second, don't forget the prayer for Torah study if that is your practice, then read through your Torah portion once quickly to get the gist of the whole thing.

Third, outline the portion. Just like in school find the major sections, then the points inside of those sections.

Four, highlight points that bring out a reaction in you.

Five, journal about one of the sections where you find your own wisdom or passions being impacted upon, write down your thoughts and feelings. Ideally find a partner to study with whom to study this section, see what new emerges.

Six, is a theme emerging for you? Is one area of the portion becoming a focus of your interest and attention? Maybe only a few verses, one sub-story or even a single fascinating word?

Seven, look up what sages throughout Jewish history have had to say about the section or verse(s) you are reacting/relating to. You can juxtapose their ideas with yours...there's unlikely to be a wrong way to interpret. Every life is a new lens that illuminates the infinite possible meanings of Torah. That's part of why you were born, to contribute your own vision, views and values to the Jewish

people's ever evolving meanings for the text.

An easy way to find the sages is to type in the book and numbers of the verse in a search engine and the word "midrash," which is a major way the sages provide commentary, by creating stories that reflect their views about that section.

For example, if you are reacting to the first verse of Genesis, you can search on: Genesis 1:1 midrash

You can also type in the names of scholars, sages and Jewish leaders you admire, past or present, who might have written on that section. You will almost always find the sages Rashi and Rambam have something to say, also try Aviva Zornberg, Elyse Goldstein, Nehama Liebovitz, z'l, Shefa Gold and Neil Gillman to suggest a few of the hundreds of wondrous commentators.

Eight, are there poems, songs, vignettes, stories or quotes from others that relate to the theme that might connect to the wisdom you are emerging from within about this portion?

Nine, look for symbols and metaphors in the Torah portion. Water, for example, symbolizes the attributes of G*d and humans known as abundance, flow, and loving-kindness. Knowing to look for metaphor means you don't have to be stuck in the apparent, literal meaning of the text. Literal isn't often the Jewish way of understanding Torah.

Ten, what is your theme? Let's say you want to say that Dinah was not raped by Shechem, but rather they fell in love and Dinah's brother's couldn't tolerate that she found someone on her own and made love before marriage, so they held the husband accountable and his family for how they raised him, and slaughtered them. How would you make this relevant today? The Saudi Government has increased the penalty to the female victim of rape to be that she receives 200 lashes. You might talk about the importance of Jews using Dinah's story and how Judaism has evolved to not punish the victim and to find and help the perpetrators evolve. You could speak with pride about the evolution of your tradition, and encourage those present to speak out. You might share a story of courage of someone who spoke out on the subject.

Eleven, jot down each point you need to make, sequence them, insert illustrations such as stories or articles or such that you feel important to briefly include. Create a flow to your narrative, get to the point where you really like the d'var that's emerging.

Twelve, give the teaching to yourself in a mirror, or tape and listen or webcam yourself and watch (ideal).

Thirteen, practice on a friend, have them tell you what they loved and what would help them feel even more engaged with the d'var, potential constructive tweaks, not criticisms.

Fourteen, revise and revisit points 11-13 until you feel fully ready to roll!. Mazel tov, congratulations on all your effort and this precious achievement.