

Anatomy of a D'var Torah

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Our Sages teach us that the Torah belongs to each and every single Jew and that each of us has the power to contribute a unique entry to the lexicon of Jewish expression, to create a *d'var Torah* — literally, a “Word of Torah.” How though does one compose a *d'var Torah*? What considerations should one take into account in finding a text, discovering an interpretation, molding an application? Printed below, please find seven suggested steps for creating a *d'var Torah*. Let us disclaim at the outset that this rubric is an artificial construct, both in terms of its specific instructions and the progressive ordering of the steps. In truth, one cannot mechanically control flashes of insight, bursts of imagination, or the wonders of associative thinking. But, at the very least, the presented guidelines are meant to provoke the thinking process and stimulate the tools of discovery. *Hatzlachah Rabbah* — May you achieve great success!!!

1. Identifying the Context: Occasion and Purpose

Undoubtedly, your desire to create and share a *d'var Torah* has been engendered by a specific occasion: opening-day at school, parents night, graduation, a dedication, a life-cycle event, a personal, religious, intellectual, or social milestone. It is important to first identify the contours of the occasion, its tone and tenor, its substance and context. Your appreciation of the occasion will guide you in identifying an appropriate text and message.

While considering the occasion, you must also formulate your goals. The goals of a *d'var Torah* can be manifold, but reduced to its fundamental core purpose, a *d'var Torah* aspires to engage, at least, another person in a moment of shared Torah learning. Sometimes the text is primary and serves as the original motivation — *I found this text and find it intriguing, challenging, fascinating, etc. and I would like to share it with another. How can I make it relevant and meaningful?* Sometimes, the application is primary and the Torah element serves as its conventional vehicle — *I have this message I wish to share with another. How can I frame it in a meaningful, constructive, and impacting way?* So, the first steps toward creating a *d'var Torah* are, by necessity, identifying the context and clarifying your purpose.

For the purpose of illustration, let us set our context as follows: We are sponsoring a *Yom Iyun* — a day of study on “Special Needs Education and the Jewish Community.” As the organizer, you are the opening speaker and would like to deliver a *d'var Torah* which will establish a spiritual base for the confer-

2. Finding a Text

How do we find our text? In *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of our Fathers* 5:26), Ben Bag Bag counsels: “*hafokh bah va-hafokh bah de-kolah bah* — Turn it [the Torah] over and over for all is in it.” The surest way to discover the raw material for limitless *divrei Torah* is *Limud Torah* — Torah study. Ideally, study Torah on a regular basis and keep a journal. Write down interesting passages and ideas, your responses to them, your questions and conclusions. In no time at all you will find that you have amassed a treasure trove of potential *divrei Torah*.

Classically, Jews in search of a text have turned to the *parashah*, the weekly Torah portion to be read the coming *Shabbat* in synagogue. Once again, Ben Bag Bag’s dictum invariably holds true — search the Torah portion thoroughly, let your imagination connect and associate, “*hafokh bah va-hafokh bah* — turn it over and over.” Something in the portion will shine forth, something appropriate and relevant, even in the most esoteric of portions. Alternatively, seek out and search through a compendium of Jewish texts; for example, skim through Nachman Bialik’s *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* — *The Book of Legends* (Schocken), a compendium of rabbinic (Talmudic and Midrashic) texts. You will surely find a text with which you connect or which resonates with your intended message.

For the purposes of our exercise, let us consider what texts might be appropriate for a “Special Needs and the Jewish Community” conference. If we wanted to focus on serving the special needs of every individual, we might wish to explore a Biblical or rabbinic personality, who him- or herself has overcome a physical handicap and maximized his or her own potential. We might, for example, search through Yishai Chasida’s *Encyclopedia of Biblical Personalities* (Artscroll) and choose to explore Moses, the great redeemer, liberator, and law giver, who himself began his life as an abandoned child and had a persistent stammer. On the other hand, if we instead desire to emphasize the merits of an inclusive, tolerant, and understanding community, we would look for a story or idea which highlights those values, such as Moses’ insistence to Pharaoh that he allow both the children and the elderly of Israel to join the Israelite’s requested religious retreat to the desert: “Moses said: ‘With our youngsters and with our elders shall we go; with our sons and daughters, with our flock and cattle shall we go, because it is a festival of the Lord for us’” (Exod. 10:9). Or, we may wish to explore a Biblical or rabbinic text which celebrates child-centered education: “*Chanokh la-na’ar al pi darko* — Educate each child according to his or her personal potential and abilities” (Prov. 22:6). For our purposes, let’s focus on Moses.

3. Ask a Question

Every *d’var Torah* begins with a question, whether explicitly or implicitly. Find your question! In what way does the text challenge you, disturb you, inspire you, or puzzle you? Find and formulate and reformulate your question. Now, once you begin, you may actually find yourself asking many questions. If so, that is wonderful; you have discovered the excitement and magic of learning Torah. However, for the sake of a *d’var Torah*, a *shared* moment of Torah learning, it is important to remember the most important principle of all in public speaking — “*Kol ha-mosif gore’a* — Whoever adds (too much) detracts.” It is important to centralize your questions into one or two avenues of investigation. This will both focus your own process of discovery and also improve your ability to communicate your teaching to others.

What type of questions should you ask? Now that’s a good question! One that is easily asked, but more difficult to answer. The truth is that any and all questions are legitimate, but here are a few guiding principles.

When you approach a text it is helpful to think in terms of concentric circles.

A. Begin at the center, literally with the *d’var Torah* — with the single word: Why was this particular word chosen to express this particular idea, and not another? Why was Moses named Moses? What does the text say? (See Exod. 2:10) What does Moshe mean in Hebrew? What does Moses mean in Egyptian?

B. Then move outward to the next circle, the phrase: Why was this particular phrase used to express this particular idea? Is this the usual phraseology or something out of the ordinary? Why when referring to his speaking problem does Moses first use the phrase, “*kevad peh u-kevad lashon anochoi* — heavy-mouthed and heavy tongued am I” (Exod. 4:10), but later uses “*va-ani arel sifatayim*” — “I am of uncircumcised lips” (Exod. 6:12)? Is the difference perhaps that the first denotes what we would refer to as a speech defect, while the second implies what we would call a speech impediment?

C. Next move outward again to the next ring, and consider the local context: the sentence, the immediate paragraph, the chapter, parallel chapters. How does the textual setting of this particular idea affect the way we should interpret? Why does God get angry with Moses when he says he is “*kevad peh* — heavy-mouthed,” but not when he identifies himself as being “*arel sifatayim* — of uncircumcised lips?” Is it perhaps that someone who considers oneself as having a defect admits defeat at the outset, as opposed to someone who views one’s personal handicaps as impediments, as challenges to meet and obstacles to overcome?

D. So far, we have asked questions about what has been said. Now let's ask questions about what has not been said. We must consider the text's silences as much as its expressiveness. *Why didn't God just perform a miracle, heal Moses and make him a naturally great speaker? Why was it necessary for Moses to go through an elaborate and complex personal development? Was Moses ever really "cured," or did he somehow learn to compensate for his disadvantage and succeed nonetheless? Additionally, why was it so important for Moses' brother Aaron to play such a central role in conveying God's word to Pharaoh? (Aaron becomes Moses' spokesperson.)*

E. Next move outward again, this time to the boundaries of the local context. This circle looks to literary bracketing (i.e., how a particular section begins and ends), and to juxtaposition (i.e., identify what ideas or story immediately precedes or follows the matter under discussion. And ask how do the juxtaposed ideas inform the matter under discussion?) *Why does Moses confront God and his disabilities alone in the "midbar" — the wilderness? (Go back to 3a and consider the single word "midbar" — wilderness." Is there a connection to the word "davar" — word or speech?)* *Why immediately preceding Moses' epiphany does he marry and join Jethro's family in Midian? Why immediately afterwards does he leave Midian, meet up with Aaron, and return to his brethren in Egypt? What might these relationships teach us about the role of an educator or an enabler?*

F. The final circle speaks to the global context. What role does the matter under investigation play in the big picture? *Moses begins his career with an absolute lack of confidence in his speaking abilities, he gradually gains more confidence, and despite his disability, by the end of his life, as recorded in Sefer Devarim — Deuteronomy, Moses has become a great orator, expressive and eloquent. He learned how to communicate and his people learned how to listen.*

4. Answering Your Questions

While carefully studying your text and asking all your circles of questions, chances are you have already begun to have flashes of insight and achieve an awareness of associations. You probably have already started to make connections and even draw conclusions. Now is the time to refocus your inquiry and choose which question(s) will center and frame your *d'var Torah* and which avenues of interpretation speak to the context, its occasion and purpose.

Once you decide on your question(s), and have a decent sense of your avenues of interpretation, begin to thoroughly investigate your questions. Continue to think of your own answers, but also look to the great Jewish commentaries (which, if possible, you should look to add to your personal library): *Midrash*; the *Medievals*, such as Rashi, Nachmanides, Ibn Ezra, and

Abarbanel; and the *Moderns*, such as Prof. Nehama Leibowitz *z"l*, Dr. Aviva Zorenberg, the *JPS Torah* commentary, the *Artscroll Stone Chumash*, etc. The Jewish cannon of interpretation contains a wealth of commentary. The only challenge which awaits you is that you may find yourself having to go through a sophisticated process of analysis to appreciate not only the primary text, but the commentary upon the text as well. Such is the beauty and challenge of Jewish learning...

5. Hone Your Application

Once you have your question(s), and your answer(s), you are ready to turn to your application and hone it to fit the materials you have developed. Your application should highlight the values of your teaching and also explain very clearly how they are relevant and speak to the purpose of the occasion. Be true to your intuition and your sensitivities. Let your personal voice be heard, and try to convey why these texts, their questions and answers speak so powerfully to you and to the occasion.

6. Shaping Your Introduction and Conclusion

Last, but not least, two essential components of any *d'var Torah* are its introduction and conclusion. In terms of the necessity of a good introduction, my *Rebbe of Rabbonus* — my rabbinical mentor — once told me that when a speaker gets up before an audience, he or she has sixty seconds to capture the attention of the audience. If you don't grab your audience in the first sixty seconds, chances are you have lost them for the duration. An interesting, compelling, engaging introduction is a *sine qua non* for an effective *d'var Torah*. A personal sharing, a Chasidic story, a good joke, a contemporary event or concern, are all good openers that will engage your audience. On the one hand, the introduction should not be gratuitous; on the other hand, do not be afraid to have fun, or appeal to emotion, or to moral conscience. Your introduction need not be long. It certainly should not be longer than the *Torah* content or the application themselves. Whatever its length, its purpose must be served: to introduce your intent or topic and entice others to share a moment of *Torah* learning.

At the same time, develop a strong conclusion. You may choose to "close the circle" and end in a fashion reminiscent of how you began: either with similar words, or by utilizing similar imagery, or by referring to your opening story. You also may choose to end with a new idea or story, or with a personal challenge. Try to close with something that will leave a lasting impression.

7. Developing Your Outline and Composing your D'var Torah

Once you have all of your disparate pieces, it is time to shape, structure, and compose your talk. Developing a strong outline is always helpful. An outline helps you identify your main points and where you need to develop transitions. And an outline makes sure you have a relevant and engaging opening, and a powerful and penetrating closing. Oratorical structures can be quite complex and literarily ornate. For example, when I studied homiletics I learned about the "H" structure in which one develops one line of thought, then breaks and develops a second line of thought seemingly unrelated to the first, and in closing draws the line connecting the two together. Or, "the Surprise Sermon," in which one persuasively leads one's audience in one direction, and then surprises them by ultimately pointing out the flaws of that approach and advocating the superior merits of an alternative approach. For our purposes, let's keep it simple. Aspire to the classic model: A. Question(s); B. Answer(s); C. Application, — bracketed by an introduction and a conclusion. Let's return to our example and see what we came up with:

Special Needs and the Jewish Community D'var Torah Outline

- I. Introduction
 1. Welcome and open conference
 2. Tell short story about a special needs child, who you reveal at the end of your story to be none other than the great Moses
- II. Question(s)
 3. Why did God choose a special needs child to become the redeemer of Israel? What does that teach us about redemption?
 4. How did Moses learn to view his disabilities and challenges? How did the people of Israel relate to him and ultimately come to esteem him? What does that teach us as a community about inclusiveness and faith in people?
- III. Answer(s)
 5. Lessons of absolute worth of every individual and their personal potentials.
 6. Lesson of value of positive attitude — how Moses learns to respect and redeem himself.

7. Need for enablers and for educational partnership in helping people achieve redemption, and celebrate and maximize their personal potentials — Pharaoh's daughter; Jethro, Aaron, Israel, and God.
- IV. Application
8. We need to develop special education which speaks to the individual needs of special needs children and help them maximize their personal potentials. Their handicaps should be viewed as challenges and we must learn to recognize the special contributions that they can make to our community.
- V. Conclusion
9. Chasidic Story about Reb Zusha — purpose is to relate the story of the great Moses to every case of special needs, even acute situations. Every person has their special mission.
 10. End with a one-line personal Challenge

A *d'var Torah* can be a powerful communication tool. It can truly teach by engaging, communicating, and celebrating our values and visions. Composing a *d'var Torah* is as challenging as it is rewarding — in the words of our Sages, "*Le-fum tza'ara agra* — according to the effort comes the reward." *Chazak ve-ematz* — Be strong and resolute! Study hard and work diligently, but most of all, enjoy the beauty of Torah!